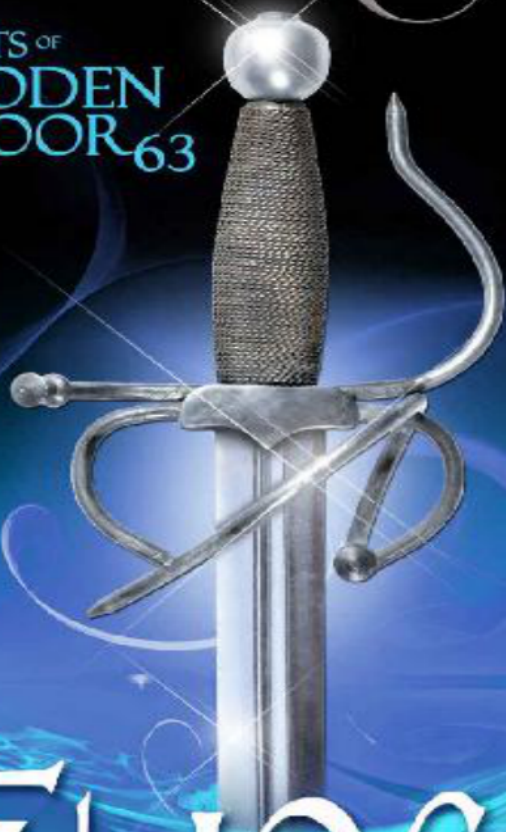


L.L. MUIR

THE GHOSTS OF
CULLODEN
MOOR₆₃



TULLOCH

Tulloch

The Ghosts of Culloden Moor Book 63

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Prologue



After the trouble had ended on Seelie Pause, Tulloch rode down off the mountain with his fellows. It was the wee hours, aye, but he didn't need sleep. Out the side window, he watched the stars inch across the inky sky with the turning of the road, and he wondered just who looked down on them. Who was it that had cared so much about Gibbs MacTavish that they sent the perfect woman for him?

While standing guard over the couple, Tulloch, Fenton, and Lindsay had watched Gibbs and Gemma fall in love and might well have known how the pair felt before they'd known it themselves. Now, Tulloch wondered if something similar might be in store for him.

How hard could it be? He'd seen it done now, up close and personal. Surely he could manage it—if he were a normal man, or a normal Culloden man without the burden of the Sight.

There was no changing his past, that was clear. But that didn't mean a woman had to know the year he'd been born or that he'd already died the once. He could play the part of a twenty-first century man as well as the rest of the ghosts from Culloden, for he had been paying attention as the decades had passed. He was no bumbling eighteenth century man blinking in awe at buildings that rose as high as mountains, or fainting at the sight of horseless carriages.

Ignorance was not his problem.

What truly might prevent him from living and enjoying a normal life was his unworldly gift of Sight. And no matter all the times it had served him well, no one ever treated him the same after they learned of it. They looked on him as some precious oracle to only be approached in a time of need.

How could that possibly help him win a woman's affection?

Obviously, the wise thing to do was find a way to silence that sixth sense in him.

He thought again of Gemma, of how far she'd come in order to cross MacTavish's path. Was it only chance that brought her? Could

chance have shaped the two so they fit like pieces of a puzzle?

Surely not.

God must have played a hand. Just as Soni once played a matchmaking hand for the first ghosts to be removed from Culloden Moor. But would God do the same for him? Even now, was he being shaped and readied? Or must that work be done by him alone?

He tried to see beyond the horizon of black pine silhouettes hemming the starry sky, and wondered if some woman, out there in the world, was already being prepared and shaped to fit the likes of him. She needn't be overly pretty in order to please him, but it might help if she weren't too inquisitive. For he had secrets to keep and fully intended to keep them.

After he considered for a moment, he was quite pleased with himself, and he sent a silent wee prayer to the sparkling heavens.

Oh, God, if ye send me an incurious woman, I shall do my best to rid myself of the Sight. I vow it. Amen.

Chapter One



For the second time in her life, Alexandra was about to stand by while someone died.

The first time was hard enough. No one should have to do it twice. But she also didn't want her grandma dying alone.

The smell of warm muffins warred with the antiseptic fumes in the halls of Lakeside Care, the hospice facility looking after Grandma Lorena. Alex hadn't been gone thirty minutes before they'd called her back. Grandma was suddenly confident it was time to go.

Sure, the old gal was dramatic on a regular basis, but she rarely cried wolf. If she said she was dying, she was dying.

Alex paused a few feet from the open doorway and sought to calm her racing heart. The scent of Grandma's favorite candle caught her by surprise. It was kept near her bed, though she wasn't allowed to light it, ever, because of the fire code. Even candle warmers weren't allowed for obvious reasons.

Fragrance had been everything to the woman. If company was coming, she'd toss a piece of celery and a quarter of an apple into the oven, so when family or friends walked through the door, it smelled like home cooking. And even though no one had cooked in her house for a year, you could still smell celery and apples if you buried your nose in her drapes.

Grandma's linens had their own magical scent that came from the soaps and softeners she used, and though Alex always bought the same brands, she just couldn't get her towels to smell the same.

Grandma claimed it was the water that did it, that there was magic in the pipes. But then again, Grandma saw magic in everything. Too bad all her superstitions couldn't save the old gal now.

Alex hurried inside and closed the door so her grandma wouldn't get busted for breaking the rules. But it wasn't Lorena standing over the candle with a lighter in her hand, it was Marie, the nurse.

"Right," the woman said. "I should have thought to close the door first." Though her eyes were dry, tear tracks made stripes in the

makeup on her cheeks. "Anyone asks, Lorena did it." She tucked the lighter in her pocket, patted Grandma's hand, then leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "Gonna miss you, you grumpy old broad."

Grandma gave Marie a wink. "I'll put in a good word for you with The Lord."

Alex held her eyes open wide, trying to keep them dry while the nurse left the room and closed the door behind her. For Grandma's sake, she wanted to stay cheerful.

"You're going to get her into trouble, you know."

"Just tell them lighting my candle was my final request." Grandma bit her lips together, as if in pain. Then her face cleared before Alex reached her side. "Sit down. This might take a minute. May as well get comfortable."

Alex pulled the heavy chair close to the bed so she could hold her grandma's hand. But after a quick squeeze of Alex's fingers, the woman shook her off.

"I knew we should have had this discussion this morning, but I wasn't ready. Now, I guess we both have to be."

"What discussion is that?"

"My will." She checked to make sure Alex was suitably sober. "I'm leaving you everything, because--"

"You're leaving me everything because there's no one else to leave it to."

Grandma stuck out her chin. "Not true. I could leave it to...to Marie." She pointed at the closed door.

"You're right. But if you're on your way out, there's no time to change it."

"That may be, but I want some promises before I go. A way to show your gratitude, let's say."

"I love you, Grandma. No matter what you leave me, or don't leave me."

"Oh, no. You're not getting off so easy."

"All right." Alex lowered her voice, suddenly noticing the old joker didn't look herself. Her face was paler than usual, so Alex scowled at her. "You need to take a deep breath."

Grandma shook her head. "If I do, my soul will sneak out my nose when I exhale. I'm keeping it in here, but just barely."

"That's not funny."

"Bullshit. It's extremely funny." Then she laughed, coughed, and eventually went back to taking shallow breaths. "Funny and true."

"All right, then. What are these promises?"

"Besides my accounts that already have your name on them, I've got a little something stashed away in my closet, in the second bedroom."

"You left cash in the house?"

"At least I didn't bury it in the backyard, so you don't have to dig it up."

Still joking. That was good.

"All right. Thank you for not making me dig."

"It's in the lining of that horrible gold coat with the fur around the hood."

"Now you admit it's horrible? The coat I wanted to burn in the fireplace?"

"That's the one. Now, aren't you glad you didn't throw it in the fire?"

They'd only ever argued about two things, and one of them was over that disgusting thing Lorena had kept for sentimental reasons, even though Alex had never seen her wear it. "That's why you wanted to keep it? Because you hid money in it?"

"Of course. No one in their right mind would steal it, would they?"

"I guess I can't argue with that."

Grandma coughed again. "No time now. Promise me you'll take my stash and go somewhere fun."

"I don't need a vacation--"

"Bullshit. I'm sorry your father was so...unimaginative. Too much of that Timmons blood in Garrity. Couldn't convince that boy there was magic in the world. And obviously, he rubbed off on you. But you must remember, Alexandra, you have McIntyre blood in your veins too. You put your numbers away and go find something to believe in. When you find it, you can come home again and play with those numbers all you want. But you have to enjoy life a little first."

"I've told you before. I'm not an atheist like dad was—"

"And I really don't want my last utterance to be *bullshit*."

Alexandra's lack of religion was the second thing they butted heads over, and the last thing she wanted to discuss that morning.

"Let's not argue," she said. "Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

"I want you to have magic in your life, as I've had. But you have to go look for it, it won't come to you." The weathered face suddenly looked tired. The little bit of color that had returned with the coughing was fading again.

Alex panicked and grabbed her grandma's hand, then patted it. "Fine. I promise to look."

"Not just a damned sunset, you hear me?"

"Okay. Any suggestions where I should look? And please don't say *church*."

"Europe. Get out of the states. Too little of it here. You have to..." Her eyes widened. "No time," she whispered, then smiled. A single tear

squeezed out the corner of one eye.

Alex gripped the boney, delicate hand and shook it. "Come on, Grandma. You're not getting out of this so easy. Tell me where to go. Tell me where the magic is."

Grandma closed her eyes. Her papery cheeks crinkled in a satisfied smile. "Italy. Greece." She opened her eyes again. "Scotland. They have unicorns..." She turned to look at the closed door and her face lit up. She threw Alex's hand aside. "Don't just sit there, open the door! Your grandpa's come to get me!"

Alex jumped up, moved to the door, and reached for the handle. This was it. If she was ever going to see an actual spirit, it would be Grandpa Timmons. And if he *had* come to get Grandma, she promised herself she would try to look at religion again, but with an open mind.

She swung the door wide and stepped back, but Marie was the only one waiting to come in. As Alex hurried back to the bed, she realized Grandma's crinkled smile was frozen in place, the bright blue eyes were closed for good.



EVENING CAME EARLIER NOW, and Alexandra worried she wouldn't be able to finish packing up before it got dark.

She'd started in the far corner of the basement and gone through her grandma's entire house in three days--sorting, boxing, trashing and donating the details of Lorena Timmons' life. Now, with millions of dust motes dancing in the last beam of light through the west window, it was time to tackle that second bedroom.

The furniture was made of blonde wood that glowed under a generous layer of shellacking. On one side of the bed stood a tall glass case containing the old woman's fishing poles. On the other side, an old-fashioned telephone table that held up stacks of Harlequin romances. The books themselves were in tatters, read so often it was a wonder the words hadn't rubbed off. The pictures on the covers would have been fashionable sixty years ago--probably the same year telephone tables were trending.

The massive drawers, built into the walls, held a hoard of untouched fabric along with a few hundred photographs of people Alexandra didn't know. And no one was left to ask. She added both the fabric and the photos to the same box and marked it for donation.

The closet she'd saved for last.

With her chest full of dread and her head full of dust, she slid the door open. Would the money still be there? It would have broken Lorena's heart if someone had stolen what little she'd been able to save over the years.

Just as Alex remembered, the gold coat weighed a ton. As soon as it was free of the rod, the ancient plastic hanger snapped in half. A pink-flowered moo moo fell to the ground with the broken plastic—it had been sharing that hanger with the coat. When Alex picked up the thin robe, she found it weighed more on one side. In the left pocket, she discovered a fat roll of hundred-dollar bills rolled up and secured with a thick elastic band.

She sat on the stripped bed and counted it.

Four thousand dollars!

Four thousand dollars would get her to Scotland. Money enough to keep her promise. Or was it?

The pockets of the coat were empty. Maybe Grandma had only meant that the coat *hid* her stash. Maybe four thousand was all there was. To be sure, though, Alex spread the coat on the bed and felt the hood, the arms, the body.

Nothing.

The unusual weight, however, came from the layer of fake fur that ran along the hem. She worried she might find something disgusting had died in the lining, but when she finally cut the seam, she found a shocking amount of money--sixty-one thousand dollars. And it made her sad to think Grandma Lorena might have gone without things she wanted or needed in order to put that money aside.

She fetched her purse from the next room, packed the cash into a gallon freezer bag, then tucked it inside.

"Sixty-five thousand dollars," she said aloud. Now she really had no excuse.

Alex took a couple deep breaths to loosen the tightening in her chest. She sighed, then laughed at the idea of her grandmother standing beside her, warning her not to breathe her soul out through her nose.

"I guess I'm going to Scotland."

Chapter Two



Alexandra always intended to look into the cost of airfare to Scotland, but that got bumped further and further down her list of priorities. It turned out that disposing of a person's estate was not something that could be done in a week or two.

Her name had already been put on Grandma Lorena's house, so there was no problem putting it on the market. She'd spent half her childhood in that house, what with her father being a single parent and Grandma an eager babysitter. But Alex had no interest in living in Scottsdale. Her work was at the University of Phoenix, in Tempe, just as her dad's had been.

By the time the house was sold and everything was settled, it was time for the new school term, and that Scotland money was now just part of a large lump sum sitting in her bank account like a large meal she couldn't seem to digest. Or a gray cloud of guilt that followed her around everywhere.

Alex pushed those guilty thoughts away and promised herself she'd start researching Scotland over the Christmas break at the college, when Tempe became a ghost town.

Since she'd begun teaching at the University, her father's old associates had invited her to family dinners, at least once a month. She suspected there was a calendar somewhere, that told each professor when it was their turn, but she didn't analyze the dates or rotation too closely, choosing to believe they were random acts of kindness.

Thankfully, none of them tried to set her up with their sons. They just treated her like a fellow alum, though conversations always came around to her father, who had died the year before she graduated. They seemed to miss Professor Garrity Timmons as much as she did.

The first such dinner of the new semester came in late September. Gary Carlton, head of the Philosophy department grew quite tipsy after dinner. Alex had brought a nice bottle of wine that appealed to him so much he nearly drank the whole bottle himself, then got a

little weepy. Unfortunately, it was then someone mentioned her father, and Gary slid smoothly over to the topic of death.

“Those poor bastards, like your father, who know the end is coming? That’s when you get to see what people really believe.” He patted Alex’s arm and nearly spilled his red wine on his white lawn chair. “Now, Garrity was an atheist, so he was what, fatalistic?”

Since the man probably wouldn’t remember the conversation in the morning, she didn’t bother indulging him. Instead, she just nodded and changed the subject. But on that quiet drive home, she finally took the time to compare her father’s death with her grandma’s.

Drunk or not, Gary was right. At the end, she did see just what they believed, and the contrast between the two was stark. Her father had been younger, yes, so it was natural for him to have more regrets. At the end, they fell apart together, wishing they had more time. He was glad he’d had an impact on some of his students, and proud of the daughter he’d be leaving behind as his mark upon the world. But there was nothing to hope for. No “maybe I’ll see you on the other side,” or “I hope there is a God.”

Grandma, on the other hand, was pushing magic like a drug, promising the nurse she’d put in a good word with God on her behalf, and smiling on her way out. The fact that she thought her deceased husband had come to collect her might have sounded delusional at the time, but when Alex compared the two experiences, she could at least admit that Grandma Lorena clung to hope until the end. Her father died without any.

Alex didn’t want to die that way. In fact, she wasn’t too keen about living that way anymore.

Maybe she did need to take some time off. Maybe she needed a little magic in her life. Or hope. Or miracles even.

No. What she needed was inspiration. And she just might find it in Scotland.

Three weeks later, when she boarded the plane, she realized why it had taken her so long to take that leap—going for Grandma would have been a mere gesture. She needed to go for herself.



NEVER IN HER life had Alexandra had a panic attack before, but she suspected she was having her first at about 40,000 feet above the east coast. The nervous teenaged boy in the seat beside her had finally fallen asleep, so the twisting of her gut had nothing to do with him.

What am I doing here? This is so stupid. I should turn around and go home where I belong.

Magic? There was no such thing. There were superstitions and

wishful thinking, and finally, delusions. Why on earth would she want to add any of them to her perfectly ordered life? Just for a little fun?

Next time, Alex, try a fantasy novel.

So she'd wasted nearly two thousand dollars on flights. At least she would set foot in Scotland...so technically, her grandma couldn't fault her for that...if she were still alive, which she wasn't.

She'd promised to go to Scotland. She'd never promised how long she'd stay.

Magic? What was she, eight? Hoping to catch Santa coming down the chimney?

The mere act of coming to her senses settled her stomach. She could finally breathe deeply again. And finally, gratefully, she was able to close her eyes and sleep.

Unfortunately, she had two more such panic attacks before the flight ended. By the time she touched down in Edinburgh, she didn't know what in the hell she wanted anymore.



SCOTLAND AND ARIZONA WERE ANTITHETICAL. This strange, atmospheric world that Alex's plane had landed on was nothing like the pictures she'd seen on the internet. This place was...unworldly. (She was careful not to even *think* the word magic.) Never mind that she'd only seen the view from the airport.

She ignored the weight of the humidity lying across her shoulders like a wet towel and went straight from Customs to a ticket counter. To fly out that night would cost her an extra three hundred, and the flight wouldn't leave until six pm, which would feel like three a.m. to her.

Even now, she was dying to stretch out on a bed, not get packed into a seat for another ten and a half hours, and that would only get her as far as New York.

Bad idea. Bad, bad idea.

Fine. She'd stay in Scotland for a little while. Maybe, once she caught up on her sleep, she might relax and enjoy the change in scenery. It didn't mean she expected to find something ridiculous.

She stood in line for a taxi, and when she got to the front, a small black car pulled up. She couldn't see a familiar brand name, but the car itself looked like it had just rolled out of a 1950's fog with Charlie Chan inside. There was a small unicorn decal on the door.

A unicorn. Of course.

Alex laughed. If her grandma could have sent her a sign from another realm, this would be it.

The Seelie Inn, a recommendation from that taxi driver, had a

seven-foot-tall statue of a male fairy in the lobby. And the only room they had available that night was the Fae Princess Suite.

Alex didn't care that the room was more expensive, even with the discount they offered. She just needed a bed. And some black-out curtains. Actual fairies could fly around her head while she slept, for all she cared.

The room was decorated in shades of teal and robin's egg blue. Thistles adorned all the pillows, but there were only two fairies she could see, and neither of them alive--a six-inch statue on a side table, and another attached to a round towel rack in the bathroom. Neither of them winked or moved--she'd watched them both to make sure.

"There. I gave magic a chance, and magic was a no show. Hypothesis proven."

At some point in the night, the front desk called to see if she would be staying another night. Apparently, she'd agreed to it because, when she woke up much later, no one had tried to move her out.

Felt like morning. It was three in the afternoon.

The thought of flying home again just made her more tired, so she forced herself to shower and go out, so her coherent memories of Edinburgh included something besides Charlie Chan's car and a hotel room with fake fairies.

Chapter Three



Alexandra turned right when she hit the sidewalk, then strolled to the corner and straight into another century.

She'd thought the taxis were dated and quaint, but the buildings on the Royal Mile were downright medieval. Any minute, the church bells would toll and a horse-drawn carriage would pull up. Sherlock Holmes would climb out and try to figure out why she wasn't wearing a dress.

The road was made of bricks!

Alex turned back quickly, to honestly prove she hadn't stepped into a twilight zone. But she needn't have worried. Modern cars were everywhere. People in normal clothes. Bikes, backpacks. Shoppers. It was just the street in front of her that was out of place.

She really should have done more research before she hopped on that plane...

After two hours of shopping and scouting, she stopped thinking about going home. There was just too much to see, including a castle up on the hill. And since she'd never see Scotland again, she'd better take in all she could while she was there.

And if she found proof of the impossible, she'd do her best to have an open mind. If not, well, as a Non-Creative, she really didn't need inspiration to have a fulfilling life. Did she?

In a shop window, a small sign caught her eye. The sentiment was simple—*Scotland is for the Soul*—and she was tempted to buy it for the charming little fairies painted around the letters. But she didn't know where she stood on the whole soul theory.

Although...she might be a little wary of letting hers slip out through her nose.



IT TOOK all evening to make up her mind, but the next morning, she

headed back to that shop to buy the little sign. Unfortunately, it was gone, and it had been a one off. Her level of disappointment was a surprise, but it only made her determined to be more decisive when she found something she liked.

It drizzled for a few hours, and when the sun popped out at lunchtime, its reflection made all the little puddles between the bricks shine like lines of gold glitter. It might have been the tenth time that morning Alexandra had wished her grandmother would have seen this city literally overflowing with charm. Of course, Grandma would have called it magic.

Her new shoes had worn sores on her pinkie toes, so she decided to call it a day and return to her hotel. She'd just have to visit the castle another day.

"*Turn left.*" The voice on her phone was from her GPS app, but she hadn't entered any destination. "*Turn left,*" it said again.

A very old sign was attached to a brick wall instead of a post. *Cockburn Street.*

She hadn't paid much attention to where she was along the Royal Mile, and since the app might be trying to return her to her original location, she followed her phone's instructions and turned down the street, hoping it was a shortcut that would get her off her feet even sooner. The road curved and the incline made her shoes rub even harder against her sore spots. Then she was disappointed yet again when her phone announced she'd reached her destination.

It wasn't her hotel, though. It was a tea shop called *The Enchanted Tea Cup*. But it didn't matter. She had to get off her feet, so she opened the old green door and stepped inside. She read the signs before she let it shut. "*Rent a cup, the tea is free.*" And "*Fortunes & Forecasts on offer.*"

She had no idea what *on offer* meant. *For sale*, maybe? And just what kind of forecasting?

"Grandma would have loved this," she muttered, since no one was around to hear her. It was a shadowy shop with heavy velvet curtains that made a wall behind the unmanned sales counter.

Maybe they weren't open. Maybe she was intruding.

"Coming!" The female voice was high and sounded far away. She blamed it on the curtains. And while she waited for someone to appear, she quickly dropped her butt on a single chair near the display window and rested her heels on the floor to make more room for her injured toes.

The green curtains opened and a woman stepped through like she was on stage. "Certainly, we're open," she said, with no accent. "Otherwise, you couldn't have opened the door."

Alex laughed. "I didn't realize I'd said that out loud."

“Did you?” The woman held the curtain aside and gestured for Alex to go deeper into the store. Or maybe backstage.

“Very funny.” She ducked through the opening and stopped, caught off guard by the setup of the large room. Round, linen-covered tables filled most of the space, and on the back wall were small cubbies with well-lit, single sets of cups and saucers inside them. “Rent a cup, the tea is free.”

“She gets it,” the woman said a bit louder than necessary. Then Alex realized she’d been talking to another woman at the far-left corner of the room—a woman who looked just like her. “I’ll just go put the kettle on.” She hurried toward her sister, then ducked behind another curtain.

“Take your time, dear.” The second sister gestured to the wall of cups. “Choose your cup and we’ll handle the rest.”

Statistically, the shop couldn’t possibly remain a business if all they did was rent tea cups and give away tea, but Alex was determined not to think about numbers while she was on her quest. As a professor with a Master of Applied Statistics, she’d been hired by many companies to help evaluate their practices and create new business plans, so it was almost natural for her to start analyzing as soon as she’d walked through the door.

She just had to fight the urge a little harder. After all, this was a different country. Success and failure probably meant completely different things.

Alex started at the high right corner of the shelves and scanned the teacups. Some of them were so fancy, she thought they might be hundreds of years old. There wasn’t a chance she’d risk breaking one of those. But eventually, a cup caught her eye. Second row from the bottom, about halfway down the wall.

It was a simple ivory cup that had, in the center, an extremely detailed frog sitting on a red-topped mushroom with pink dots. To add to its appeal, it had monarch butterfly wings that were bright blue instead of orange, but the black pattern on them was undeniable.

“Definitely this,” she said, and carefully removed it along with its solid ivory saucer.

The second sister assured her she’d picked her own favorite, told her to sit, then took the set from her and disappeared behind that curtain. It was only then Alexandra wished she’d asked just how much that cup rental would cost her.

Five short minutes later, the sisters presented her with a carefully arranged tray complete with a steaming teapot, a plate of tiny cookies, and her chosen cup and saucer, all with variously sized doilies beneath. A square pink box held rows and rows of tea selections, and while she rifled through her choices, the sisters took a seat at the

table.

She took a cookie while she started her tea steeping, and the woman to her right spoke. "What brings you to Edinburgh?"

Alex explained about her grandma's last request. "So I'm looking for...magic, as silly as that sounds." She hadn't intended to say it, and she wondered if, deep down, she wasn't ready to give up hope. Maybe there was truth serum in the cookies.

"Silly?" Both women laughed. "You are sitting at a table in The Enchanted Tea Cup. We are the resident experts on silly. Er, that is, magic."

The other sister sobered and shook her head. "You know, people who come in here are usually looking for true love. They come to have their fortunes read."

"Ah," Alex said, "that makes a lot more sense."

"I beg your pardon?"

She grimaced. "I'm doing it again. Sorry. I promised not to...I mean, I was wondering how you could stay in business by just renting tea cups. Fortune telling makes more sense. That's all. But it's none of my business—"

"Doesn't matter," one sister told the other. "She's not here for true love. No need to peek into her future and tell her where to find the man."

"Very funny. Hang on just a minute." She finished steeping her tea, took out the bag, and took a sip. "I guess I should have asked before, but how much was it to rent the cup?"

"One pound. Free if you buy a tenspot of advice. Fifty if you want to know where to find *him*."

"*Him*. That true love you were talking about?"

"Of course, dear."

Her head shook before she'd even made up her mind. "No thanks. Maybe just the advice. Do you know where I can find magic? Real magic? Something to blow my mind?"

The sisters looked at each other, smiled, then nodded. "Drink your tea, Alexandra."

Those smiles were unnerving, actually. So she set aside her empty cup, laid her ten pound note on the table and reminded herself it was only advice she was buying. It didn't mean she had to follow it.

The sister on the left produced a notebook, wrote down an address, and passed it to her sister, who added a simple map and tried to explain it.

"Can't I just use GPS?"

"Certainly. Use your GPS to get to the motorbike shop, then you'll need the map for the rest. It will all make sense once you're close."

"Might I ask a favor," asked the other sister. "Don't tell them we

sent you. Don't mention us or the Enchanted Tea Cup. In fact, I wouldn't mention Edinburgh if you can help it."

"So what do I say when I get there? I'm looking for miracles, and I was told to come here?"

"Might work," said one sister.

"Might not," said the other.

They all three laughed.

Alex shrugged. "Any advice on what I do then?"

"Loretta, pass me her cup."

Loretta pushed the cup and saucer across the table like it was full of nitroglycerine. The other woman lifted it just as carefully and gazed into the bottom as she might examine a crystal ball. Then she frowned and turned the cup a few times before her expression cleared.

"There we are," she said. "It will be fine. Just be patient. Just like everything in life, showing up is eighty percent of success."

The pair got to their feet and slowly ushered Alex back through the curtains to the front of the store. She paused at the door to thank them.

"Remember, dear, if you want to know where to find that man, we'll give you credit for the tenner."

"Yeah. Sure. I'll keep it in mind."

"And Alexandra?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd wear your old shoes tomorrow."



LATER THAT EVENING, Alexandra sat alone by the little fireplace in the hotel's dining room. She was frozen to the bone, and no matter how close she got to the fire, the heat never made its way to the real chill. After the skin on her face was too hot to touch, she finally acknowledged the truth and moved to a chair further from the hearth.

What made her cold wasn't the temperature, but her thoughts.

She'd never told those women her name. They hadn't seen her credit card. So how did they know she was Alexandra? And when she'd wondered if the store was open, she hadn't said it out loud. Which meant two complete strangers had read her mind.

They'd also talked like they knew exactly who her true love was, and where to find him. And last, but not least, she'd never said anything about her new shoes hurting her toes, though they might have deducted that from the way she walked.

Still...

Maybe she already had her proof that there was real magic in Scotland. But instead of feeling inspired, she was freaking out.

She threw something in the fire that finally chased the chills away—it was that little paper with an address and a map.

Experiment: complete.

Conclusion: she would definitely not follow advice given by odd sisters in creepy tea shops.

Chapter Four



*W*ickham Muir's Ranch...

Two men fought on the hillside, Wickham Muir and Gibbs MacTavish. The rest of the ranch was eerily silent, as was the big barn that functioned as the great hall, despite the fact that two dozen people sat inside.

Tulloch, the fiftieth ghost to rise from his deathbed after the Battle of Culloden, appreciated that bets on the current fight had been forbidden. Usually, he would head to the furthest corners of the ranch to hide while such contests played out. His fellow soldiers from Bonnie Prince Charlie's army knew he had a bit of Sight, and couldn't resist watching him before placing their bets. Therefore, Tulloch made himself scarce to keep things fair.

But not this time.

Oh, the other Highlanders glanced at him regularly, not because they'd made bets, but because they'd been ordered to stay inside the barn and not even bear witness to the contest.

For Tulloch, it was much like watching a band of five-year-olds who'd been told to sit on their hands while a parade of ponies danced past the barn, just out of view. But if he were honest, he was just as worried as they, having a vested interest in the outcome.

In the past eight months, since they'd become mortal men again, MacTavish--known for 270 years as ghost number 37--had become a good friend to them all.

On the other hand, Wickham was their host, and had played a role in getting them off the battlefield where they might have lingered 'til the end of time itself. Wickham could turn them all out on their ears if he wished, though that was unlikely. Besides, his wife, Ivy, would never allow it.

Tulloch turned to look at the woman who played the part of hostess on the ranch. With her husband away for the better part of the past few months, and likely to leave yet again, they'd all committed to look after her and her three young laddies. Until Wickham came home

to stay, the man was grateful to have so many loyal men on hand.

Or was he?

Had MacTavish overstepped where Ivy Muir was concerned?

Though the Highlander was closer to Ivy and the lads than the rest of them, his heart had recently been secured by Gemma Dorsey, a brave American woman who was the only other female in the barn that day. She had witnessed unearthly events at Wickham's cabin that made their Culloden ghost story near believable—that they truly were resurrected Highlanders from the eighteenth century.

Some of those events, he'd been party to himself, and even Tulloch still marveled. And he, a once-dead man...with the Sight.

Gemma glanced at him, her brows crooked together with worry. Since he had no premonition of mourning, nor of any degree of sadness, he felt free to assure her with a wink.

Fenton, who'd been stationed outside, gave the door a knock.

"It's over!" Alexander, the oldest boy, ran to the door and flung it open, and soon they all poured out into the yard again to watch the bruised and battered men come down the hill. With an arm over each other's shoulders, it was clear there were no hard feelings remaining between the two. If MacTavish had overstepped, he'd paid for it. And Wickham was now well acquainted with how MacTavish disapproved of his leaving his family for long stretches. Whether or not their opinions would change anything was yet to be determined.

Wickham had been home two days. Would there be a third?

After a bit of teasing, and not a lick of sympathy, the women went into the house for tea.

"We'll need a banquet tonight, Alwyn!" Wickham waved his boys to him. "If I am to come home for the twelve days of Christmas, I must leave again tomorrow."

"Twelve days!" The youngest hadn't noticed the last bit, nor was he big enough to understand the sum of twelve. "A whole twelve days!"

The eldest child nodded, then turned away lest anyone witness his disappointment. He hadn't taken three steps before he was scooped up by his father and whisked away toward the lower corral where a pair of ponies waited. All eyes turned away, to give them privacy.

MacTavish raised his hands to gain attention. "Wickham will consult with each man privately, before he goes. Speak freely. Tell him yer needs, and he will do what he can for us before he goes. For he shan't return until Yule."



THAT AFTERNOON, as the smells of the coming feast made all stomachs grumble, the Culloden men were called to the house one by

one. The two older laddies sat on the ponies being led around the lower corral while other Highlanders took turns distracting the bairn with a late-season kitten. If the poor creature kept to the outbuildings, it should survive its first winter, but it was black and would be easily spotted against the snow by owls and the like.

Tulloch sensed Wickham was anxious to speak with him, so he was surprised to be called last.

Unlike MacTavish, Tulloch hadn't been inside Wickham and Ivy's home more than two or three times. He'd stood before the dining table consulting with Wickham, who sat at the head. This time was different. Wickham waited in the parlor, waved him forward, then shook his hand. "Firstly, I'd like to thank ye. Things might have gone badly had ye not been on hand at the cabin. We are all lucky ye were willing to help."

Tulloch answered with a nod, then thanked Wickham for his generosity. "Now that pleasantries are behind us, what is it ye would have from me?"

A slow grin softened the man's features. "Ye're a canny man. I do have a question for ye, but first, tell me, is there anything ye need before I go? References? Money--"

"I have only a question, but it can wait."

There was movement above stairs, and together they glanced at the ceiling.

"Please, sit." Wickham moved to one of the chairs and perched on the front edge, with his hands braced on his knees. "I would ken," he said quietly, "might ye be able to see how my family will fare without me?"

Tulloch was ready for the question. "I sense heartache, loneliness, but no more than they already suffer. Though I cannot see far ahead, I sense no...imminent devastation. I have found it is unwise to look too far in the future, for individual choices are yet to be made. Choices that will change the course of a river, or a life."

Wickham nodded. His shoulders relaxed, and he turned his attention to the fire that crackled with the recent addition of a fresh log. "My sisters have the Sight, but not like yers. They can see what is meant to be, perhaps not what shall be. Their senses are limited for impending doom, especially for people for whom they care deeply." After a long moment, he looked away from the fire and spoke low. "And ye, Tulloch. What would ye ask of me?"

For a fraction of a second, he considered changing his mind. But that foolishness rose and fizzled like a spark trying to escape the fire. "How can a man like me...rid himself of his gift?"

Wickham sat back, obviously surprised. "Ye dinnae wish to have the Sight? If ye had yer druthers--"

"I would be a normal man. An average Highlander with no advantages over his fellows."

"Has something happened--"

"I was glad to be of some help to MacTavish. No doubt ye've heard all that transpired on Seelie Pause?"

"Aye. Frightening stuff. Once I finish...that is to say, until I am home for good, I'll not trust my family to go there without me. As for yer gift, Gibbs and Gemma might have been at the mercy of those villains had ye not known to stay."

Tulloch waved off the significance of his contribution. "I had no such gift on the moor, obviously. But now that it is back, I am remembering the burden of it in my first life. And now, it seems equally heavy, if not more so. Emotions run much higher in this century. It is not so easy to see what is ahead. And each day I dread a repeat of Culloden and the three steps that will take me back to it. Knowing, warning, and being dismissed."

"I can only imagine..."

"After all my years as The Seer of Huntly, Prince Charlie should have trusted me! And now, just speaking of it takes me back, makes me ill." He bent over to relieve the pain in his gut, more real than imagined.

The entire disaster at Culloden could have been avoided if he'd been allowed to speak to the prince directly and convince him to put off the battle and search for more equal footing. So many lives might have been spared, despite Cumberland's new strategies. And with so many Highlanders still alive, the duke might not have dared attack their homes and families like he did.

Scotland might have regained her independence back then. But supposing about the past was pointless. It was his own future he wished to fix.

"So, is there a way to be free of this? On the moor, the night of the Reckoning, Soni gave her power to yer brother. The old man facilitated it?"

"Aye. But Soni was a Muir Witch giving to a Muir Witch, aided by the chief of the witch clan. I cannot know the source of yer power, Tulloch. I can make my way through time, but other than a few singular powers, I can manage a few parlor tricks. I cannot touch yer gift."

Tulloch's heart twisted. His fists clenched in frustration. "Can ye try?"

"I wouldn't presume to attempt such a thing. There are no specific memories to target in yer head. This gift is part of ye. To lose it might mean losing yerself."

He hung his head, then shook it. "I fear it is not a part of me, but

that I am a part of it. A small, insignificant part. And I dinnae ken if I wish to go on if I cannot be free of it. Is it possible yer sisters can see my future? Say what happens to me? If they could give me a wee bit of hope, I could carry on."

Wickham's head was already wagging. "This is what people say to ye, is it not? Tell me the future? Give me some hope? Just as I asked when ye walked through the door?"

"Aye. It is true. Though not so much in this century. Yet."

"Ye'll be hounded all the days of yer life. So best ye keep it to yerself. Perhaps ye could pray it away. Ask Father Donne if he has an idea--"

"If ye mean an exorcism, I've already lived through one of those, and narrowly escaped. When I refused the advances of Lady Gordon, knowing it would cost her life at the hands of her husband, she retaliated by feeding me to her Machiavellian priest."

Wickham shuddered. "I am sorry, sir. But ye never ken. Perhaps God has plans for ye. And I will telephone my sisters before I leave. I'll see if they might ken something to cheer ye. Just be wary. They're a shifty lot."

Chapter Five



Tulloch thanked Wickham for his advice, then stepped outside again. The air was as cool and crisp as a pile of pumpkin-colored leaves, and from the porch, he could see nearly the whole of the ranch. Clusters of men joined in various tasks and games. Laughter bubbled from all directions. It was a fine autumn afternoon, and if he were very careful and resisted the urge to think on the future, his curse might lie dormant as a sleeping dog on a thick rug.

A car approached the bottom of the drive. While Tulloch he watched, he tried to remain in the moment, but it was impossible not to wonder who had business at the ranch. Who might get out of the car? And would Wickham and Ivy would allow them on the premises?

"Just watch. That's all. Just observe," he whispered. But his curiosity sprang free, his sixth sense reached out...and smacked violently against a stone wall. It wasn't that he saw nothing, it's that he was prevented from seeing at all.

Had the simple act of speaking his wish aloud, to Wickham, turned off the Sight? Or did someone in that car have something to do with that wall? He told himself not to assume too much as he held fast to one of the posts that held up the porch roof.

The car door opened and a woman emerged. She was tall with a mass of black hair that made her taller still. When she smiled and waved to the laddies, her white teeth were radiant against her nut-brown skin. She wore a brown poncho over mustard yellow slacks that ended in knee-high boots. Her cheerful, smooth voice carried to Tulloch's ears, but he couldn't make out the words.

McHenish, one of the men watching over the lads in the lower corral, shouted back to her, pointed toward the house, then to the intercom.

The woman made her way to the side of the gate and found the control box. While she spoke with someone inside the house, she seemed to be staring directly at Tulloch. The conversation wasn't long. She stepped away, but her gaze remained on him—or possibly the

house—for a long while. Then she suddenly returned to the car.

He was both relieved and disappointed when she drove away.

Wickham or Ivy must have refused her request for admittance, so he doubted their paths would cross. Still, he was curious. If he never hit that wall again, he would always wonder if she was the cause.

He waited on the porch for half an hour, but neither Wickham nor his wife came outside. And since he was loathe to interrupt when the couple might well be saying their final goodbyes, he trotted down the steps and turned right, toward the path that led to the wash house. A cool shower would make a welcome distraction and help him forget.

He hadn't made it ten yards, however, when his feet turned around and headed in the opposite direction, as if they'd decided they wished to play with the laddies and the ponies as well. But he knew better. It was that damnable curiosity driving him down the hill. If those Highland babysitters had heard anything of the woman's request, he had to know it.

That was it. That was his entire problem in a nutshell. It wasn't that his gift couldn't go away, it was that he couldn't leave it lie. If he could learn to be less curious, might he live a normal life after all? Could atrophy and neglect alone set him free?

It would be an interesting experiment, but of course, he first had to learn what the mysterious woman had wanted.

Unfortunately, McHenish had nothing to tell him other than the woman had been beautiful. Thus, she couldn't be the woman Tulloch had requested God send for him, so he let the matter go and told his curiosity to stand down.



Earlier that morning...

The day Alexandra decided to drive to Inverness, the heavens punished her with a heavy downpour and made the trip an hour longer than expected. Though it was illogical, she kept insisting, to any supernatural power listening, that she hadn't wanted to go in the first place. The Scottish weather gods were not swayed, however, and the rain didn't let up until she was within 30 miles of the town.

Two things had changed her mind about that quest to Inverness.

The night after she'd chickened out in front of the fireplace, she'd dreamed about another deathbed vigil. Only this time, she was the one in the bed, and it was Grandma Lorena standing by.

"You did a fine job, Alexandra. Didn't take long at all to find your first witch. But you should have kept going. No one stops at their first clue, they move on to the next, and the next, until they find the prize! Now, are you going to lie there? Or do you think you can find the

courage to get back in the game?"

"I don't know, Grandma," she'd said. "I'm not sure anymore what that prize is supposed to be. There are no numbers involved. I can't sort it out if I can't quantify anything."

Grandma laughed. "The prize is what you want most of all. You'll know it when you see it. Trust me."

Alex blew off the conversation as just a dream, and when she woke up in the morning, she packed up to go home. In the lobby, when she'd opened her purse to check out, she pulled a piece of paper out of her wallet and opened it.

It was the paper she'd tossed in the fire. The paper she'd watched burn.

For a second, she wondered if she'd tossed something else in the fire, but no. She clearly remembered watching the fire eat away at the ink, at the handwriting, at the map.

She'd been talking aloud to her deceased grandma ever since.

Now, she had a rental car and a destination. And she'd found a number she could cling to—the number 2. She'd found a little courage, and all she had to focus on was finding Clue #2. Lucky for her, she had directions.

After the long drive, and her failure to find the right road, she pulled over next to a broad bay of water to park and take a break. The sound of the waves lulled her, and after five minutes of fighting it, she rolled up her windows, closed her eyes, and let sleep take her. After all, there was no rush.

She just wanted to be fresh-faced and alert when she went knocking on strange doors.

Her last thoughts painted a dream for her in which she woke up in her car, still parked beside the water. Surrounding the vehicle were a dozen Scotsmen in kilts peeking at her through the windows. But not just any Scots. These were big ones, beefy ones with long dark hair and blue paint on their faces, straight out of the movies. When they suddenly turned their backs, she wondered if they were about to moon her...and shocked herself awake.

The waves rolled up onto the pebbled beach with no one blocking her view of it. The dream was gone, but she checked her rear-view mirror just in case.

All clear.

She rubbed her face to make sure she was wide awake before getting back on the road, then she pulled out and went back in the direction she'd come from, toward Mitchells, the motorcycle shop. Maybe it was just the change of direction, but the strange, angled road she'd missed the first time, was now visible. Just a little turn of the steering wheel sent her up the side of the hill. One turn at the top

would take her to the ranch. "Just one big Z," she said, just as the sisters had described.

When she got to the end of the lane and stared up the long drive, she had the strangest sense of *déjà vu*. But she chalked it up to the detailed description one of the sisters had given her.

Movement caught her eye in the nearest paddock. It was a pair of ponies being led in a circle, with little boys on their backs. Two large men--in kilts--held the reins and teased the boys. Everyone was laughing except the younger boy, who clung very tightly to his saddle--all focus, no fear, just like her dad used to say.

Another lanky man carried a tiny animal and chased a toddler up the long grassy drive. His kilt flapped behind him and gave Alex a clear view of the backs of his bare thighs.

"Please let this be the right place."

She got out of the car and hoped one of the men would come close enough to talk. She waved, but they barely glanced her way. So she shouted, "Is the owner home?"

The man leading the ponies stopped long enough to shout back, but she didn't understand a word. Then she realized her question made her sound like some pushy salesperson. No wonder they ignored her. He shouted again, pointed to the house, then to the gate.

Thanks to some very lucky genetics, she was rarely ignored, especially by men. Her jheri curls drew a lot of attention when she walked into a room, out a door, or climbed out of a car. Sometimes, it took all her concentration not to imagine what onlookers were thinking about her. And her father's advice of *all focus, no fear*, was sometimes the only thing that kept her from running away.

Then there were times like this, when she felt completely invisible for the very same reasons. Too bad she couldn't control it either way.

He'd pointed to the far end of the gate and she made out a metal square the size of a shoe box. As she neared, she saw there was an intercom. Besides a speaker and a keypad, there was a little red button. And since no instructions were posted, she pushed it.

Half a minute later, a woman responded. "Yes?"

"Hi there. I...my name is Alexandra Timmons, and I know this is going to sound crazy, but I was told that if I was looking for m... miracles, I should visit your ranch."

The answering silence lasted so long she worried the woman wouldn't respond at all. Then finally, there was a click.

"Is this a joke?"

Alex laughed lightly. "You know, I kinda wish it was. But no. I'm seriously looking for something that can't be explained by science. I know I'm saying it all wrong, but I promise, I'm not crazy. It's kind of a long story. Can I buy you a cup of coffee and try to explain?"

Another long pause.

"Who sent you here?"

"I...uh...overheard some people talking—"

"I'm sorry. I can't help you."

No accent. The woman was American. Alex was now doubly disappointed she wouldn't be able to sit down and have a conversation in which she could understand every word. Maybe, if she'd just asked to have a pleasant conversation with a fellow American, she might have had more luck.

"Thanks for your time," she said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. If there is some secret handshake or password, they didn't give me one."

"They?"

There was no reason not to fess up, since she was being turned away. "A couple of women—"

"Twins?"

"Yeah. Sounds like you know them."

"I do. If you see them again, tell them their timing stinks. And I'm sorry, no magic here. But this is Scotland. I'm sure you'll find plenty. Good luck."

There was a louder click, then nothing at all, like a door had been slammed in her face.

She stepped back, but before she turned away, she sought out the shadowy figure on the porch. He was still there, still watching. But at least he hadn't been the one to send her packing.

With all the dignity she could muster, she walked back to her car, got in, and drove away. And though it might be her imagination, she felt his eyes following. Too bad he hadn't been Clue #2.

Chapter Six



A tangible pall descended on the ranch as a whole, and everyone knew, without asking, that Wickham was gone again. For a while, he and Ivy had made a big show of saying goodbye in the yard so the laddies could watch their father drive away in a taxi. Now, he simply waited until his sons were all asleep, then disappeared.

Two quiet card games occupied some of the men, but Tulloch remained apart, sharpening his sword for a battle that would never come. If only he could use the weapon to remove his bloody gift...

His chest tightened without thought. He felt a wave of despair crash through Ivy Muir as if he were the wave, as if he were the cause of her pain. His Sight sometimes came to him that way—violent and personal—and it stole his breath. His despair could rival Ivy's when he acknowledged his gift was no weaker than before. The wall he'd hit earlier, when he'd stretched it toward that woman, was gone again.

The Seer of Huntly was alive and well and living in the twenty-first century Highlands.

A dozen pairs of eyes watched him. Tulloch shook his head. "Wickham is gone."

Wallace opened the barn door and stuck his head inside. "Ivy's a comin'," he said, before disappearing again. The man was much like Tulloch in that he sensed when conflict was inevitable. But Wallace's intuition came from a desire for peace rather than a true gift of Sight, and Tulloch envied him that.

That wave of despair flooded the barn just before she stepped through the door. She didn't bother with her usual smile. Everyone knew how she'd feel about being deserted again, and she knew they knew. There was no need for brave faces.

She scanned the room, found Tulloch, and nodded. "May I speak with you outside?"

"Stay!" McLaren jumped to his feet, tossed his cards aside, and led the rest of the men out of the barn. Each of them gave her a nod as they passed, but with her attention on Tulloch, she hardly noticed.

"That was kind of them," she said, waving at the discarded cards as she came closer. She sat across the table from him, then stuffed her hands into the pockets of her long jacket.

"Not at all," he said. "I fear McLaren was about to win yet again, which would bring him joy for only a moment...until the fight started."

Ivy cheered instantly. "You could see that?"

Tulloch shook his head. "Just the emotions on the horizon. Ye have changed nothing. He shall still have that joy, and later, the joy of the fight. The men get frustrated when Soni's favorite is overly lucky."

Ivy nodded, her smile gone. "I dislike taking advantage of you like this, but—"

"Ye wish to ken if Wickham will return?"

She pressed her teeth into her lip and nodded. "He promised the boys he'd be home for Christmas—"

Tulloch was careful not to shake his head. "Christmas is a long while away. I cannot sense so far, ye ken?"

"Oh. I didn't know that. With his sisters, and even Soni, it seems like they know all sorts of details—"

"But they are witches, are they not?"

She nodded slowly, then frowned. "Then what are you?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Cursed, milady. Poor Tulloch is merely cursed."

She finally smiled. "I don't suppose you'd like to reveal your first name? If MacTavish were here, he could make a pretty penny off that little piece of information. Of course, he would have to split the profits with me."

"It is not so great a secret. I simply do not wish to be mocked."

"That bad, huh?"

"Not too terrible."

"Then maybe you should just get it over with. Pull the bandage off."

"One day."

She nodded and silence fell awkwardly between them. "You spoke with my husband? You have everything you need?"

"Aye. But I wonder. That woman who came to the gate today. Who was she?"

"I don't know. She said she was Alexandra Timmons, but that meant nothing to me. I think Wickham's sisters were involved. Who knows? They're always up to something with their tea shop business."

"Anyway, they've roped Wickham into helping a few times, but that always takes him away from home. I wasn't about to let that happen today. And right now, if I found out he was helping them when he could be here, I'd come unglued. And I really don't like it

when my boys see me unglued."

"So ye sent her away?"

"I did." She suddenly panicked and grabbed his hand. "Have I ruined something?"

Tulloch shook his head. "I sensed nothing at all about her. Nothing at all." Which was the truth.

Ivy relaxed, then her brows rose. "Did you *see* her?"

"Only from the porch."

"I know the gate camera distorts things, but she was beautiful. Stunningly so. My first impression was that she's a news reporter, or someone looking for a juicy story, but I doubt it now. I know Wickham's sisters get crazy ideas sometimes, but they would never knowingly send someone to the ranch who could expose us."

Tulloch shrugged. "Might I know what reason she gave for coming?"

Ivy turned her head and eyed him from the side. "A pretty woman makes you nervous?"

He rolled his eyes. "I am afeared of no woman, no matter how comely."

Her sly smile turned into a grin. "If she didn't scare you, even a little bit, you might want to get your vision checked."

He pretended patience for as long as he could. "And her reason?"

"She said she was looking for miracles. For something science couldn't explain. Magic, maybe? I don't know. Lots of people come here looking for some sort of...I don't know...inspiration. But that's not my problem. My concern is keeping us all safe and out of the public eye."

Tulloch found it impossible to swallow. He dared not test his voice. So he simply smiled and nodded.

The fact that Ivy left with a smile on her face pleased him very much considering the depth of her despair, but she'd unwittingly done the opposite for him.

God himself couldn't have sent him a clearer message—there was an inquisitive woman out there looking for him. She was the antithesis of the sort of woman he needed, and he must, at all costs, keep out of her path.

Thank the heavens Ivy hadn't opened the gate.

Chapter Seven



After her stay in Edinburgh, Alexandra had grown accustomed to the Scottish style. A little bit of new, a whole lot of old, and just enough ancient to give any establishment flair.

The Palace Hotel sat on the west side of River Ness and had all those elements, though in different proportions. A lot more *new*, a huge dose of *ancient*, and just a little touch of *old* that made you wonder just what decade—or century—you were in.

Both the furniture and the fabrics leaned heavily toward crushed velvet, which itself was a little dated. But the colors were contemporary. All the plaid, especially on the floor, simultaneously screamed Scotland and golf course. The machine she thought was an iron turned out to be an electric kettle for boiling water. And just in case she forgot just how old the hotel was, a water heater hung on the wall at the back of the shower and looked very much like a toilet tank.

"The important thing is it works," she muttered, while she washed her hair that morning in gloriously heated water. Her toes tingled painfully as they were forced to thaw, and she made a mental note to wear socks to bed from then on.

Her body had finally grown used to the time change, so she'd slept like the dead. But in the middle of the night, when she suspected her feet were icing over, she couldn't wake up enough to do anything about it. She was stuck in a crazy dream about those sisters at the tea shop tiptoeing around her hotel room, looking through her luggage and her purse.

When she woke, she thought she could smell old-lady perfume, but figured it was probably from the previous hotel guest. It was probably what had prompted her dream.

"At least it will make a funny story," she said, though she didn't know who she'd tell it to. Maybe Gary, the next time he invited her to dinner.

She'd taken a hiatus from the university, and had two job offers willing to take her on whenever she was ready. She just didn't know if

she wanted to give up teaching altogether. If she did, she might never see that look in her students' eyes when the light went on, when the reason behind the method finally clicked, when they realized how a small change could alter important outcomes.

And when some twenty-year old said, "Who knew statistics could be so fun!"

She was a geek to the bone, and there were more kids out there who needed to embrace their geekiness.

Alexandra dropped her wool dress over her head, pulled on her cable knit stockings and knee-high leather boots, then chose her small hoop earrings. There was no need to go full out Vogue on the small city of Inverness. But "runway model" was a lot less offensive than "scary salesman" no matter where she was.

If she approached strangers with her crazy request, she didn't want to give them even more reason to flee. On the whole, people tended to be nicer to well-dressed models, even those with jheri curls. And after being turned away at the ranch, she needed a good day today. She needed to meet talkative people. Her self-esteem needed a little boost and a little goosing.

Outside her window, across the river, stood an actual castle made of red stone that might have been five hundred years old--or just fifty. People flowed in and out of it like some city/county building. And since she'd never heard of The King of Inverness, she figured it was some sort of public services place that people occasionally used as a backdrop for selfies. But hey, it was a castle, and it was as good a place as any to look for a magical thread to pull on.

Facing the river, there was a bridge just to the left of the Palace Hotel. The heels of her boots were only a couple inches high, so she wasn't worried about the walk. She wore a short cape that matched her dress, held closed by her grandmother's broach, so the weather didn't matter as she struck out for adventure.

Absently, her hand lifted to touch the broach. "See this, Grandma? I'm headed to another castle, looking for something to believe in."

"Looking for something to believe in. Got it," her phone said.

Alex laughed, then closed all apps on her phone and turned down the volume.

The pavement was shiny and black with rain from the night before, and the clouds blocked out the sun. Thankfully, her socks were thick and only the smallest wisps of wind made it all the way to her skin. But for an Arizona girl, it felt like tiny ice kisses on the backs of her knees.

Halfway across the bridge, she paused to take in the view. Red castle on the left, dark gray Palace Hotel on the right, with little dunce-cap-roofs to help it live up to its name. The river was wide and

fast. All focus, no fear.

“Miss you, Dad,” she whispered.

She thought about her father while her boots clicked and clacked to the end of the bridge. It had been a long time since she’d spoken to him out loud simply because he would never have done the same if their positions were reversed. But it did ease a little of the ache. She would have loved to have a conversation with him about everything that had happened since her plane had landed.

“At the end of the bridge, turn left.”

Alex stopped and fumbled for her phone. She was sure she’d turned the volume all the way down, but suspected the GPS app overrode everything else.

“At the end of the bridge, turn left,” it said again.

The last thing she’d said, that the phone picked up, was that she was looking for something to believe in.

She looked to the right. The castle was on a small rise, not far at all. It was early in the day, so, if she went adventuring, she’d have plenty of time to check it out on her way back to the hotel. And honestly, she was tempted to see just what her phone thought was something she could believe in!

She stepped off the bridge and her phone again told her to turn left. When she obeyed, she almost felt like she’d earned a little recognition. “Well done,” she told herself. “Very brave. Grandma would approve.”

The phone was silent, so she kept trudging up the street, away from the castle. But with the wide river running straight through the city, there was little chance she’d get lost. After about a block, she worried the app had closed, but it hadn’t.

“In five hundred feet, turn right.”

She laughed at her reaction to the sound of a computer voice. It was like having a friend walking next to her as she charged into a wholly unknown part of the world.

At the end of the block, she turned right.

“In two hundred feet, you will arrive at your destination.”

In two hundred feet, she stood in front of a large white building that took up half the block. The bottom right corner was a business front, painted black. The gold lettering above the windows read *The Black Isle Bar*. Though it was early in the day, the open sign flashed. Through the window, she could see plenty of tables, half a dozen customers, and a large bar along the far wall. A lunch special was taped to the door.

New pizza! Highland Venison, Strathdon Blue and homemade chutney.

Since she’d overslept and missed the window for breakfast at the hotel, she figured a “woodfired pizza” was as good a brunch food as

anything else, so she went inside.

The conversations were calm and quiet, like a church on a weekday. A waiter, with his arms full, nodded toward the tables. "Anywhere ye like. Be with ye in a jiff, love." A few minutes later, he was back with a bright smile, hands on his hips. "Welcome to Black Isle, beautiful."

The compliment caught her off guard. "Uh, thank you."

"Have an idea what ye'd like this mornin'?"

"I overslept, so I missed breakfast—"

"Would ye prefer breakfast then?"

"I didn't see it on the menu."

"Nae problem, love. Traditional Scottish and the lot?"

And the lot? At the moment, she could eat a horse. "Sure."

"Coffee or tea?"

"Coffee."

"Right then. Won't be long, love." He went to a doorway behind the bar and shouted. "Timmy Maitland! Scoot over to the Palace Hotel and pick up a Scottish traditional. I'll call and have it ready."

Alex hurried to the bar to stop him. The irony was almost painful. "Wait," she said. "I don't want you to go to any trouble."

The waiter picked up the phone and shook his head while he dialed. "No trouble. He'll drive. Food will still be warm when he gets back." He nodded and turned aside. "Weaver? It's Mick at the Black Isle. Do us a favor..."

Alex went back to her table. She couldn't stand to listen to all the fuss that would have to be made on her account. She hid behind her hands and took a deep breath. Someone knocked on her table and she looked up to see Mick grinning at her. "Breakfast is comin'. And no charge, of course, for eating here instead of the Palace."

"I don't understand."

"Weaver said ye're a guest. Ye're owed a breakfast."

"How did you know—"

"Not me. Weaver. When I told him a real beauty stopped in for breakfast, we worked it out between us." He winked, then chuckled like he was quite pleased with himself.

She put her head back in her hands.

"Now, love. No fuss for us. No fuss for Weaver. How else will we pass the morning, eh?"

She straightened and forced a smile. "You are too kind. Thank you."

"Cannae be too kind, love. But ye're American. So mind ye don't go tippin' Timmy. It'll go to his head and he won't wash another dish all day."



BREAKFAST ARRIVED in three large boxes along with two insulated cups of gourmet black coffee.

Just as Mick had promised, it was all still warm. “And the lot” apparently meant she was given all the options she might have eaten in the hotel restaurant. And though she regretted the waste, she put a pretty good dent in most of it.

It was basically a ham and egg breakfast supplemented with weird little potato pancakes, canned beans, and roasted tomatoes. And just in case all that didn’t fill her up, there were small containers of yogurt, muesli, canned fruit (removed from the can), and a small carton of milk. In the final box was a sealed bowl of warm oatmeal and two tiny bottles even too small for airplane rations. One was cream, the other was whisky.

Her Palace breakfast, and its containers, covered the entire table. The rest of the customers had gone, and it was only Mick in the room, so she asked him, “Anyone else hungry?”

The man smiled and shook his head. “Dinnae fash.” He called Timmy out of the kitchen. A young kid that couldn’t possibly have a driver’s license. “Clean that table, lad.”

She would have liked to ask his age, but she didn’t want to hurt his feelings. And after he’d bundled and removed the food and containers, she waved Mick closer.

“I have a sort of project, and I’m hoping you might be able to point me in the right direction.” Since there was no better way to explain it than to tell him about her grandmother’s deathbed wish/blackmail, she gave him the briefest summary she could.

He didn’t even laugh. That, alone, proved her phone had led her to the right place. Did that count as a miracle?

“If it’s miracles ye want, I’d look to the church.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that’s what she meant by something to believe in.”

“A pity she couldn’t have spoken more clearly.”

“Yes. Yes, it is. So if I get it all wrong, she can’t hold it against me. She said look for magic until you find it. She even suggested Scotland. Well, actually, she suggested Italy first.”

“Italy!” Mick pushed his chair back from the table. “Unless it’s a sunset ye’re looking for, Scotland is the place for all things magic. I’ll grant that we’ve spilled over a bit into Ireland, and they’ve spilled into us. But nay, lass. Ye’re in the right place.

“In fact, the Highlands are the prime spot in the whole of the country. Right here in Inverness...” He suddenly frowned, then started again. “Right here in Inverness...” He shook his head. “Forgive me. I

cannae remember what I was going to say.”

“You were going to tell me where I can find magic in Inverness.”

“Was I now?” He frowned and rubbed his chin.

“Maybe you have witches here?”

“Witches? Auch, aye. There is a ranch...” He frowned harder, and pressed on the side of his head. “Forgive me. Ma heid's loupin'. I'll send Cait to get ye sorted...” He got up from the table and wandered into the kitchen, his hand still on his head.

A woman, wearing a black shirt that matched Mick's, hurried out and made a beeline for Alex's table. “Sorry. Mick's feelin' poorly. What else can I get ye?”

“Nothing. I owe you for the coffee and a delivery fee for the breakfast.”

“Nothing for the breakfast, and that coffee is on the house. A pity about Mick. Headache out of the blue, he said.”

“We were talking about magic, and witches. He said something about a ranch...”

Cait's eyes widened. “He shouldn't be talking about the ranch.” Then her expression cleared. “Any ranch, I mean. Beltane—that is, All Hallow's Eve—has long passed. We've all put away our witches' hats.” She picked up the coffee cup and backed away. “Safe travels, now.”

Shouldn't be talking about the ranch?

The ranch?

A secretive ranch that might have a sturdy metal gate and heavy security? Or did Inverness have a ranch that was home to witches? Or were they one and the same?

“I think this qualifies as Clue #2.”

Chapter Eight



Tulloch was tucking away his clean clothing when a small earthquake hit. Holding to the edge of the oversized bunk beds, he worked his way to the corner and stepped quickly into the doorway of the tack room. There, he stood with his hands braced against the sides and waited for the chaos to stop.

Nothing fell. Nothing jumped or swayed but his own body. He realized it was a warning of chaos to come!

It did nothing for his roiling stomach, but he closed his eyes and concentrated. "Who?" Faces flashed behind his eyelids, unfamiliar to him. But then he felt his chest burst, saw a familiar room through tear-filled eyes.

Simon stood at the end of the row of beds watching him. The man was practically part of the Muir family, or he would be, once he married Soncerae, Wickham's niece.

"McLaren, I fear something is soon to be amiss with Ivy. Will ye go--"

The big blond turned and rushed to the door. Because the quaking continued inside him, Tulloch followed more slowly.

McLaren waited at the front door, then rapped firmly as Tulloch caught up to him.

The earthquake settled. "I was too late," Tulloch said quietly. "Whatever it is, it's here."

The door opened slowly. Ivy stood back, blinking rapidly. "Not now, Simon." She began to push the door closed, but the tall man stuck his foot in the way.

"Ye've had a shock, then?"

She frowned, then noticed Tulloch and sighed. She opened the door wide to let them in. "You could call it that."

Stepping inside the house was like jumping into a deep pool of emotions for Tulloch. But Ivy's distress had many nuances to it. Her storm was far from over, only held at bay while she was distracted. She was sad, yes. But guilt-ridden as well. Perhaps a bit of anger.

He ducked to gain her attention. "So it isn't Wickham, then?"

"Wickham?" Her eyes widened with terror. "What do you know?"

He held up his hands and shook his head quickly, emphatically. "Only that ye're distraught. I only guessed the reason."

She exhaled and her shoulders relaxed. "Good. That's good." She bid them sit in the living room. "I have to get out of here, take a break. I've decided to go to New York with some...friends...and I feel horrible for leaving the boys for something unimportant, but..." She shrugged. Tears gushed from the corner of her eyes. "I need to feel normal again."

Settled in her chair, she reached for a paper tissue from the side table and dabbed her eyes.

McLaren offered sympathy. Tulloch added his own with a nod, finally understanding the confused emotions swirling around the room like a storm cloud held at bay.

"Would ye like us to watch after the laddies, then?"

Ivy shook her head. "Wickham's sisters are coming to stay with them. It was their suggestion, actually. Jillian and Jules Ross will be going with me. Just for a few days. We don't see each other often, and our relationship is tricky, you might say. But at least I'll be around females for a change. No offense."

With their worst fears alleviated, Tulloch and McLaren excused themselves and left the woman in peace. The tall man returned to the barn, but Tulloch lingered on the porch as he had before. With the vague image of the mysterious woman in his mind, he reached with his senses toward the gate and hoped for some clarity.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

She may well have left the Highlands altogether.



ALEXANDRA SCANNED the pretty hotel room one last time to make sure she hadn't forgotten her phone charger or anything else she usually left behind. Then she checked herself in the mirror.

"Listen, Grandma," she said to her reflection. "I'm doing what you want. I just have to do it my way."

The staff were very kind when she checked out, and they sent a young kid to carry her bags to her rental car. She saw it as one last chance to find out what the people of Inverness might know about the ranch outside of town.

She offered the boy a ten-pound note to distract him.

"Cor! No, madam. Thank ye all the same."

She continued to hold out the bill. "Go on, take it. I insist."

He grinned and took it.

"Now. I want to know where I can find something--or someone--truly magical around here. I can't go home until I find it. And I do want to go home."

"Magical? Like the Clava Cairns or the Fairy Pools?"

She leaned back against the driver's door and crossed her ankles. "Well, I don't know. Have you ever heard of anything magical happening in either of those places?"

He scrunched his face, frowned, and shook his head. "My cousin, Connor, shite himself once, at the cairns, but only because his friends tore off and left him. But there's nothing magical about shiting yerself."

She bit her lip to keep from laughing. "No. I don't suppose so. Any other suggestions? Maybe there's something closer to Inverness? Something here in the city? Or just outside the city?"

His face cleared and all the freckles settled back into place. "Sure. Plenty of folks claim they've seen ghosts on Culloden Moor. Go up there at night, maybe, and ye'll catch one out and about."

"Culloden Moor."

"Aye, Miss. That'll be yer best bet. Plenty of castles have their own ghosts, too. But if ye're looking for fairies and witches and the like, I'd say ye should have been here for Beltane."

She thanked him, then let him go. She'd heard the same a half dozen times. She should have come a week ago, for Beltane. Big party. Plenty of superstitions. But nothing remarkable ever happened.

Except for a kid named Collin crapping his pants.

It looked like she wasn't going to find Clue #3 unless she first followed #2, which meant going back to the ranch. And since she couldn't get past the gate, she decided to use the skill set she'd been taught since she was five—the Scientific Method.

Step one: Observe.

In order to observe, she had to change her circumstances just a smidge by making herself less visible. And since it seemed that everyone in Inverness seemed to know everyone's business—at least between bars and hotels--she had arranged to rent out an Airbnb away from the center of town and closer to the ranch itself.

"I'm really going to enjoy this."

Chapter Nine



The Tiger on the Wall was a Chinese restaurant located in an ancient, almost castle-looking place called Strathness House. It was such a strange setting for a Chinese restaurant, Alexandra was reluctant to go inside until two couples came around the corner and led the way. She made it inside just as the drizzle turned into a downpour.

The maître d' didn't seem surprised by a party of one, and the food turned out to be just as "well tidy scan" as the bellboy at the Palace had promised. It made her feel like she was home again, eating at George Yang's in Phoenix. And that familiarity made her a little homesick.

Not that she had much to go home to.

The job. The university. Her cute house that sat in limbo, waiting for her to come back and turn on the A/C. There weren't even plants waiting for water. Everything inside was fake. Everything outside was zero-scaped.

She ordered dessert and went over her list while she waited for it. Now that she was settled at the Air B&B, the real work would start in the morning.

The bell above the entrance jingled as another couple ducked in out of the rain and shook their heads like a pair of dogs. But it wasn't a man and woman, it was a pair of tall men dressed like lumberjacks. A pair of dirty gloves waved their fingers from the back jeans pocket of one man, and she looked away before someone caught her staring at his butt.

Instead, she took a drink and stared at the large dragon painting on the wall while she watched the pair from the corner of her eye.

The maître d' gave them a little bow and hurried away without a word. The pair conversed, then began looking around the restaurant. Alex let her attention wander to the lobby again, and just then, the second man stepped clear of his friend and looked in her direction. She could tell by the slight jerk of his body that he was shocked by the

light of her. Had he seen her before? Did she have something on her face?

She turned aside and wiped her mouth with her napkin, then pulled a compact mirror from her purse and took a quick look to see if her nose was on straight. Considering his reaction...

No. Her face was fine.

She looked up just in time to see him backing away, out of view. His friend stared at him, then turned to look at her. Thankfully, his reaction was more friendly. In fact, he grinned and headed her way, raising a hand when he neared.

"Hello there," he said.

She took his hand, gave it a shake, then waited for him to release her, which he took his time doing. "Hello."

"Might ye be the lass who came to the ranch a few days past?" He wore jeans and three layers of shirts, but now, she could easily imagine him in a kilt. His hair was only to his shoulders, not like the long dark hair of his friend.

"I might be, yes."

"No luck, though."

She shook her head and decided to let him chat away. Maybe she'd learn something. She indicated the chair on the opposite side of the table and hoped he'd accept the invitation.

"Nay, but thank ye. We've come to collect the takin' out. The chef's night off, ye see."

"You have a chef on your ranch?"

"We do. A Welsh gentleman called Alwyn. Worth his weight in gold already--"

"Already?"

"Aye. Been with us less than two months. Well, I'd best be--"

"Is your friend shy?"

The man frowned and looked over his shoulder. "Tulloch? Apparently." He nodded once, like some sort of bow, then started to back away.

"You don't have any tips, do you, for getting the lady of the house to talk to me?"

"Are ye a reporter?"

She laughed lightly. "Not at all."

He shrugged. "If Ivy has turned ye away, then ye'd best abandon hope. We respect her decisions as our own."

"Her husband feel the same? Maybe I should get in to see him."

The man's face darkened. "Give it up, lass." He gave a little tug to the hair over his forehead. "Good even' to ye." He flashed a fake smile, then turned and headed back to the lobby as the maître d' appeared with a large box. Another employee carried two sacks and

handed them over. The shy one came forward to take the box and the two headed for the door, but before he reached it, he glanced in her direction so briefly, she wondered if she'd imagined it.

Oh my gosh, it's him! The shadowy figure from the porch!

She couldn't just let them get away!

Despite the weather, she left her jacket on her chair as a promise she'd be back, then she hustled after them.



TULLOCH HAD WORKED in a great many trades over the summer months, but none of them had been as rigorous as the life of a rough neck on an oil rig in the North Sea. He and Hanlon Forbes had gone out as extra hands three times in the last month, but thankfully, this had been their last. He reckoned Forbes only took the job because Tulloch was going along, and if danger had been in the cards, he'd have forewarning.

It was a night for celebration as far as Tulloch was concerned, and since it was Alwyn's night off, he and Forbes agreed to collect Chinese food for everyone. Now he was frustrated with himself. How had he not sensed trouble at the restaurant? Was he so weary, physically, that he hadn't felt the warnings?

Perhaps because the trouble was his alone, and his Sight rarely worked on his behalf.

He regretted his reaction to the beauty. In fairness, he shouldn't have recognized her at all, having only seen her from a distance. But there was no missing that hair--that perfectly perfect mass of curls. And hadn't she worn that same mustard yellow when she'd stood at the gate and waited for entry?

To be honest, he'd thought of her dozens of times since then--each and every time he'd caught sight of yellow. Heaven help him when the daffodils were due to explode across Scotland in the spring.

Now, as he hurried across the street with a box full of food, he was ashamed. What kind of coward hides around the corner to avoid a pretty woman? Hadn't he laughed when Ivy suggested he might be frightened by her?

He would need to take a personal inventory when he was safely inside the gates again.

"Wait!" A woman called out from the doorway. He dared not turn in case it was she.

Forbes glanced back. "Hurry," he barked, then ran around the far side of the truck to get behind the wheel and push Tulloch's door open from the inside.

"Please!" She'd crossed the street. Maybe twenty feet and closing.

Tulloch set the box in the center of the seat, but didn't get in. A man could only be so rude.

He straightened and turned. A mere two feet separated them. Again, he was taken aback by her beauty, and stared without speaking.

"I'm sorry to chase you down," she said, gasping slightly, "but you know, once you're on the other side of that gate, you'll be out of reach." She gifted him with a perfect smile. "Tell me I'm wrong."

He would have smiled too, but he was too busy taking in the sight of her, trying to memorize her features so he could see her when he closed his eyes.

"Well, at least you're not denying it." She was still out of breath, but not from chasing them. Did she always speak so...intimately? He would have to ask Forbes, for the man had spoken with her at the table, while Tulloch hid.

"There is nothing I can do for ye, Miss. Or is it Missus?"

"Miss." She took a deep breath. "Alexandra Timmons."

"If ye'll excuse me..."

He expected her to back away. Instead, she took a step closer and stared up into his eyes. If she inhaled deeply again, her chest might touch his. If he inhaled deeply enough—but he couldn't seem to do it.

"And you are?"

He debated, and while he debated, his mouth took matters out of his hands. "Tulloch."

"Just Tulloch?"

"That is enough."

"First or last?"

"Pardon?"

"Is it your given name, or your surname?"

"It matters not."

"Matters not? You from the seventeenth century or something?"

"Or something." He grinned at his own cleverness.

She seemed surprised. "Oh, wow. You should smile more often."

"As should ye." He'd spoken softly, but only because she was so close.

"Talk to me, Tulloch." She matched him in tone. "I'll come to the gate tonight at...say ten? Just come talk to me. We can chat about... Chinese food, if you like."

He bit his lips together, no longer trusting them. Then he put his hands on the woman's waist. She caught her breath, dropped her gaze to his lips, and waited. He leaned forward, slightly, until she closed her eyes, then he stepped forward, pushing her as he went, forcing her ever-so-gently backward.

Her eyes flew wide and he tapped her on the nose. With a few

quick steps, he was in the truck. Thankfully, she stayed where he'd put her, and he was free to pull the door closed. Forbes chuckled and waved, then shouted out his open window. "Give it up, lass."

Winding through town, Tulloch hoped Forbes' concentration on his driving might distract him from other matters, but that wasn't to be.

"She was a beauty."

"Aye, she was."

"Beauty is a weak word. Exquisite is better."

"It is a fine word."

"For a fine woman."

Tulloch growled. "A woman we shan't meet again. Now shut it."

"A pity ye didn't come to the table to chat her up. Seems she took a fancy to ye. Almost like ye'd met a'fore."

"Nay. Like the others, I saw her at the gate, but I from the house."

"Perhaps it was wise, then, to play the shy laddie at the restaurant."

"Shy?"

"Aye. Ye piqued her interest. Brought her running after ye, did it not? If ye'd have gone to her table and spoken with her, she would have shooed ye away like a fly."

Tulloch snorted. "I wasnae pretty enough for the likes of her." Tulloch snorted again. "Didn't stop ye though, did it?"

Chapter Ten



Alexandra groaned and stared at the faux purple canopy over her bed--a block of paint on the ceiling with fabric draping down from both ends. How humiliating! He'd known she'd been waiting for a kiss, then he'd pushed her away. Now, she would lose her mind if she didn't get a chance to explain, to convince him she didn't go around kissing strangers.

She'd just been caught off guard when he'd stepped close and leaned in to kiss her. Another second, and she would have pushed him away.

Another second. She was sure of it.

She rolled her eyes and groaned again. What if he stood her up?

Technically, he'd never agreed to meet her. Plus, he'd already rejected her once. Going to the gate would just give him a chance to do it again. But if she didn't go and he showed up, they'd be even.

She should just focus on the plan for tomorrow. Maybe go to bed early...

The clock read 8:48. By 9:09 she was dressed again, but this time, in her darkest clothes. She was going because it would drive her crazy if she didn't. Plain and simple. If she happened to look fabulous, it was a bonus for her whether or not anyone noticed.

She'd never been one to play games, and until that night, she'd never been much for flirting. She dressed for respect, for success, but never for seduction. In fact, it was probably her unwillingness to tease men that made her love life non-existent.

But that encounter beside his truck had unleashed something in her. She was a different woman. And if she never succeeded at anything else while she was in Scotland, she would succeed at this:

Tulloch would be left wanting.



Tiger on the Wall had a fine cook. In fact, Tulloch had rarely seen his fellows clean their plates so well. Perhaps it was, as they said, that Chinese food did not linger long in one's stomach. S'truth, they all looked hungry for another meal.

McHenish sat across the way sucking on his fork, his brows pinched. "I cannae help but wonder what would draw a woman like that to our door," he said, for the second time.

Unfortunately, Forbes had been happy to recount their misadventure at the restaurant, and with nothing else more interesting at hand, Tulloch had sat through nearly two dozen opinions. He was grateful Forbes hadn't mentioned the woman's invitation to meet at the gate that evening.

Of course, she wouldn't come, after the trick he'd played to move her away from the truck door. But he did not want his fellows hanging about, watching the gate for hours, then pitying him for being forgotten.

Of course she wouldn't come.

And if she did, he certainly had no plans to speak with her. Out of all the men on Wickham's ranch, why had she homed in on him? Had she sensed something...extra paranormal about him? Had she heard of his gift? Was he the source of the magic she sought?

His real fear was that she might have plans for him, just as the Earl of Huntly had when he'd learned of Tulloch's Sight. Did she hope to use him in some nefarious way?

Well, she'd be sadly disappointed, for he had no intention of exposing his secret to anyone besides the Culloden men, and only because they already guarded each other's secrets.

Ewan MacFie stood and rubbed his stomach. "What say ye all to a fire out of doors tonight, before serious snows come?"

"Not I," Forbes said loudly. "I must seek my bed or I shall end with raiding Alwyn's cupboards."

Enough men agreed with Forbes to silence the idea, for which Tulloch was grateful. If the woman did come after the gloaming, with all these former ghosts wandering about the yard, who knew what might happen?

A heavy hand slapped him on the shoulder. "Ye owe me for this," Forbes said in his ear. "Whether or not the lass shows."

Tulloch opened his mouth to assert that he wouldn't be watching for her in any case, but Forbes had already walked away.



TULLOCH DOUBTED the beauty would come and nudged his thoughts on to the following day. His own plans were to find work--something

less intense and less dangerous than the last endeavor. Nothing would happen at the ranch to bring on strong emotions from anyone. Peace was a pleasant thing.

So with that coming peace on his mind, he stretched out and tried, yet again, to fall asleep. The sound of heavy breathing came from above him, and he looked up to find Forbes' dark head hanging off the upper bunk.

"Best go now," the man whispered. "The time is at hand, my friend."

Tulloch huffed. "She'll not be comin'. And I'll not be goin'."

Forbes disappeared again, but Tulloch distinctly heard his mockery echoing in the rafters—it was the distinct noise of a roosting chicken.



IT WAS a wonder Alexandra's self-esteem survived the thrashing she gave herself on the way to the ranch that night. She called herself an idiot two dozen times. Tried to convince herself to turn back. Then she tried to prepare herself for any and all scenarios. And all in the span of a mile and a half.

In the end, she still ended up on Clachnaharry Road, driving slowly past the motorcycle shop so she didn't miss that switchback turn. The forest on both sides of the road were dense and eerie in the headlights, and she caught more than one pair of shining eyes watching as she inched her way up the hillside. She would hate to be on that road on foot.

With only a sliver of light from the moon, she was taking a risk by turning off her lights before she reached the end of the road. But she didn't want to draw any more attention than she had to. Anyone who guarded their property with that fence, and that intercom, would definitely have cameras around. Thus, the black clothing.

She pulled off to the right and stopped long before the gate, which lay on her left. Since the driver's side was on the right, she had to suck it up and get out next to those trees which were as dense and eerie as those on the hillside. If there was a pair of eyes watching her, she was careful not to notice. But she was spooked enough to run out into the grass-and-gravel-striped road regardless of who might be watching.

A pair of red tail lights on the back of an ATV climbed the rise, away from the gate. Just before the house, it swept around to the left to circle the barn.

"Night patrol," she grumbled. "That's just great."

She lit up her phone to check the time. Five minutes to. She'd cut it close. Maybe too close. She held the bright screen against her black jacket and turned it off, then she continued to the gate.

No visible cameras, but that meant nothing in the dark. Since there might be one on the face of the intercom, she ducked under it as she passed. Then, to make herself at least partly visible, she stood in the center of the gate and gripped the vertical bars. Maybe, from a distance, that infuriating man might see her silhouette, but the only light was the size of a pencil eraser and it shined down on the touchpad of the intercom.

"Is that yer idea of stealth?" The deep, mocking voice came from her left. She could only hope it belonged to Tulloch.

"Listen. There are creatures living in those trees."

"Aye. There are. But nothing with *four* legs will attack ye tonight," he said, insinuating she wasn't as safe from two legged beasts, but she pretended not to have noticed.

"That's a relief."

He stepped out of the shadows much closer than she'd expected. He must have been on the other side of the intercom pole. And this time, he wore a large-checked, blue and green kilt with a black leather jacket.

She glanced at his knees. "Going to a late party?"

"Nay. Just getting comfortable."

She smirked. "Comfortable. Got it."

He came to stand in front of her, two feet from the gate, then spread his feet apart and put his hands behind his back. "Ye wished to speak of...Chinese food, then?"

She snickered. "I think you know what I want to talk about."

He shrugged, but said nothing.

"Tell me. Why is it that four different people mentioned this place when I was asking about provable magic?"

"Did they now?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, you're right up there with the Clava Cairns, the Fairy Pools, and the Culloden Moor Battlefield."

"Auch, high praise, then. So why do ye not seek yer miracles at one of those?"

"What makes you think I haven't?"

He stared into her eyes for a moment, then his smile broadened. "Visit the ancients, the fairies, and the...spirits at Culloden. And if ye come back empty-handed, I ken some card tricks." He backed away. The lines of his kilt quickly disappeared.

"No! Come back, please! I have things to say."

Just when she was sure he'd gone, that kilt appeared again, and he kept coming until there was nothing but a few inches and that metal gate between them. She was tempted to reach out and grab his jacket, to keep him from walking away from her again.

He cocked an eyebrow and waited.

"I meant to tell you...to explain that I don't go around kissing strangers."

"Nor do I." He sounded sincere.

"You just caught me off guard, that's all. I'm sure I would have stopped you."

"Ah. Ye're sure, are ye?"

Very slowly, he reached his hands through the bars, latched onto her own dark jacket, and pulled her tight against the metal. Then he leaned forward. "We're still strangers, lass."

She lifted her chin. Inside her head, she screamed, "Now! Walk away now! Leave him wanting!" But she couldn't quite convince her body. And when he leaned down, all she could do was watch.

As it turned out, she wanted him to kiss her so badly, she could have wept when his lips touched hers. His pull on her coat continued while her mouth tried to learn his. There was something about the bars between them that made her feel almost desperate. But she couldn't let it go on.

She broke the kiss, but didn't pull back. "Tulloch?"

"Aye?" He breathed the word against her lips, then kissed her again.

She was practically panting. "Can't we get rid of this gate?"

He pulled back then to look into her eyes. "Is that wise?"

She shrugged. "I will trust you. But will you trust me enough to let me inside?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "What will ye do, make a break for it, run up the hill? And after ye've found nothing but a few animals and the same number of men, what then? Wake milady and her three wee'uns?"

"I'm not interested in counting heads."

He sighed. "Alas, there is nothing to see here. Getting inside these gates takes ye no closer to yer quest. And I'll have no choice but to toss ye over my shoulder and carry ye out again." He released her jacket, then gripped the bars. "For a woman to be allowed on the premises, she must meet a certain requirement."

"What requirement? Maybe I already qualify."

"Ye dinnae. Believe me on this. And it cannae be explained."

"Sounds like you're making it up." Since he was still within reach, she grabbed his coat and pulled him close, then she lifted her chin again and silently demanded he kiss her again.

He obliged. It was hard, rough, and fast. And when she pulled back, she whispered, "Let me in."

Chapter Eleven



The Highlander stared into Alexandra's eyes, but he couldn't have seen much in the darkness. His eyes were as shadowed as hers, so she wasn't learning much either—unless she counted the chemistry lesson. She never knew one man could affect her so completely and so easily. They even breathed in unison.

"If I let ye inside, lass, ye ken what would happen."

"Besides the running and the catching and hauling me back out again?" A little chill ran up her spine at the image and for a second or two, made her doubt the whole feminist movement.

"Besides that." He swallowed audibly. "I reckon we would end up in that tack room together." She followed his gesture to the small square building at the end of the corral. "Ye'd get straw in yer hair. Not easy to remove from these charming curls, I should think." He picked out a curl and pulled, then let the hair slowly slip from his fingers. Another round of chills made her shiver.

Other than that, he wasn't touching her, but it his words and his low tone were doing more for her than that first kiss, but she'd be damned if he'd find out about it.

"And if I said no?"

A sad little smile brought out a dimple in his cheek. "I shall do us both a favor and bid ye good night. No regrets."

She shook her head and her hair bounced back and forth. "You have me all wrong, Mr. Tulloch. That's not what I'm interested in at all."

"Aye?" His raised left brow told her he didn't believe it. And she could understand that. With so many hot men in kilts running around the place, she was surprised there wasn't a set of bleachers by the gate for all the women who'd like to take up the sport of Highlander Watching. Alex had little doubt they had women knocking at the gate all the time. No wonder he suspected her.

"How can I convince you?"

"What is it ye want, Alexandra?"

Her heart turned to mush at the sound of her name whispered with a strong brogue. That "r" at the end, didn't stand a chance.

"Do ye even ken what it is ye're looking for?"

She went through the list in her mind. Magic, miracles, something that couldn't be explained by science. Then there was the whole witch thing. But she couldn't stand there and repeat that word with a straight face. He wouldn't believe it any more than if she'd claim she was searching for vampires.

There was only one dignified word to describe it. "Inspiration. I'm looking for inspiration, okay? Something to believe in." Her shoulders fell. There was no more pretense holding her up anymore, and she slumped against the gate and leaned her head against the bar. When she could finally look him in the eye again, she was caught off guard.

He looked horrified, like she'd said the one thing he couldn't accept. Maybe she *should* have said she was looking for witches. After all, it was Scotland. Didn't they have a whole history of witches?

"I said something wrong. Tell me. What was it?"

He shook his head and backed away from her, never turning while he disappeared into the shadows. Then his voice floated to her out of the darkness.

"Go, woman. There is nothing for ye here. Nothing at all."



IT WAS FAR TOO LATE at night for Tulloch to call the priest, so he would wait until morning. Wickham was gone, and he might not have spoken to his sisters about Tulloch's future. So Father Donne was the only shoulder left to him. And he needed direction.

There had been one other, among Culloden's 79, who had the sight. A man named Finlay Robertson, who had come to him after the prince had rejected Tulloch's dire warning. He'd commiserated and confessed that he, too, had a bit of sight, and sensed devastation ahead. But they'd both stayed to fight in any case, for neither of them wished to be remembered for deserting Scotland in her hour of need.

Robertson had already risen from his deathbed when Tulloch's turn came. And likewise, Soni had sent him from the moor early on as well, and now the man lived and breathed and had married in the States. If he were still in Scotland, Tulloch would seek him out.

All the frustration and disappointment he suffered as the Seer of Huntly was fresh in his mind, as if those centuries on the moor had never happened. And he cursed Soni for bringing his Sight back when she'd called him from his grave. Why couldn't it have remained there, in the mud and blood of Culloden. Why must he drag his old life along with him in the new?

A charming lass had stood at his gate, and he no sooner could have allowed her into his cursed life as allowed her on the property. Once she learnt the truth about him, she would see him as a thing—a protection, a rabbit's foot, a gargoyle to watch over her door. And he'd cease being a man in her eyes, when a man is all he wished to be.



A FEW YEARS BACK, Alexandra had dated a guy named Craig. And soon after that first date, things started disappearing from her house. She'd find doors unlocked that she knew she'd locked, and she'd finally called the police. They'd suggested she hide some cameras around her yard and her house and tell no one about them. That's how she'd discovered Craig was going to her house while she was at work. And that's how she gained enough pedestrian knowledge to set up a remote camera on the gates of the ranch.

She just had to place it without anyone knowing.

How do you hide a camera in front of a security gate that probably had cameras aimed at it?

Very carefully.



EVERYTHING ALEX DID that morning was done with a little more force, thanks to that Scot rejecting her a second time. Just when she thought she had him wrapped around her finger, wanting to remove the gate between them just as badly as she'd wanted it, he'd stepped back, shaken like a wet dog, and walked away.

When she exchanged her rental car for a white cargo van, there was still enough frustration in her veins to make her slam the keys on the counter.

The woman behind the counter smiled. "Tough night, eh?"

"Very tough. Sorry about that."

"Just dinnae drive angry," she said as she handed over the van keys.

"Right. I won't. Sorry again."

It took two stops to find the right equipment, then she headed back toward the ranch.

Learning what really went on there was a quest now, and if she could stay within the law, she was going to figure it out. Proving a theory wasn't just a job for her. She lived for it like amateur sleuths lived to solve mysteries. And getting a little revenge along the way would be priceless.

Coming in the middle of the night might have been smarter, but

she hadn't forgotten about those glowing eyes on that road, and she wasn't about to interrupt whatever those critters did in the bushes at night. Besides that, she wanted to be able to check the range of the camera before she left the area, and it would be easier in daylight. She might not get a chance to return and make adjustments.

Kiss me and send me away? Yeah. Go ahead. See how that works out for ya.

She parked at that same spot by the water while she got everything prepped. The lithium battery should last for a week at least, probably two. By the end of two weeks, she planned to be back in Arizona where the air was nice and dry and didn't press against her skin like a cold wet sponge.

She'd purchased a roll of brown duct tape to attach the camera to a tree. She just hoped there would be a branch in the right spot, and that no one would try to stop her. It wasn't as if she would be trespassing. She hoped.

She was ready. Time to get it over with.

But she wasn't ready. Her breath shook as she exhaled. Her hands might look steady, but her insides were trembling. And this time, it wasn't because that Highlander had his hands buried in her jacket, holding her close for a kiss.

She couldn't believe he'd actually done it—right after she'd insisted she didn't go around kissing strangers. Yeah, she'd willingly pressed herself against the bars, but still!

As for her own defense, she had to blame it on the circumstances. There was something about standing toe to toe, in the darkness, that made her suddenly brave. Or suddenly foolish. Definitely reckless.

She reached for her water bottle and drank like she was dying of thirst. And as the memory of those kisses started bubbling in her bloodstream all over again, and she remembered just where the night had been headed, she admitted that his walking away might have been the wise move after all.

Chapter Twelve



Alexandra had never done much that qualified as clandestine before, unless she counted the times she'd skipped class in jr. high just to prove she could. She'd never snuck out of the house in the middle of the night or borrowed her father's car before she had her license. So it was no wonder she shook like a leaf when she headed back to the angled road that led to the ranch.

Just as she turned onto it, a large vehicle came from the opposite direction. It was bigger than a large passenger van, but smaller than a bus. And as far as she could tell, there was only a driver inside.

He smiled and waved, and didn't look at all alarmed by the sight of her. His short hair and normal clothes meant he wasn't one of those kilt-wearers from the ranch. But then she remembered there were other farms on that road, and she relaxed.

A few minutes later, she had her destination in sight. In the light of day, she realized the trees opposite the gate weren't as close as she thought the night before. And she was grateful she'd chosen the camera with an automatic zoom because there was a lot of distance to cover if she was going to pick up any activity on the property.

Though she was supposed to drive on the left, she veered over to the right and parked a few feet away from the trees. She was careful to stop when her window lined up with the long driveway leading up the hill from the gate.

Though it was close to noon, there was little movement. Men marched between the house and the barn without glancing her way. And though she listened for them, she heard no ATV's patrolling the place. The only thing staring at her was the control box. And if someone was watching a live camera feed, and worried what she was doing there, she figured she only had a few minutes before they would reach her.

She had to work fast, and to stay focused on speed, she started counting out loud.

One one thousand, two one thousand...

Her driver's door was on the right side and so close to the trees she could have reached out and touched them. Instead of opening it, she climbed in the back and opened the sliding door. She grabbed the camera, the mounting case, and the tape. She had pliers and a knife in her breast pocket and a small pair of binoculars hanging around her neck.

Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two...

Since it was October, most of the leaves were yellow, faded orange, or gone. There were a few pines, but too far away. The bark of the closest trees was a dirty white, not brown. Her tape was going to stand out. But hopefully, with all the variety of tones, it would blend in.

Black would definitely stand out, so she'd already covered most of the camera with the brown duct tape. And for good measure, she ripped off a little bundle of leaves and taped them on the front of it, being careful not to put them near the lens.

Thirty-three, thirty-four...

She scanned for the right branch. The angle had to be close to ninety degrees from the road. It had to be within the parameters of her van window. And she had about half a minute to secure it. She had to choose carefully, but quickly!

Fifty-seven, fifty-eight...

There! If she removed those leaves, she'd have a clear shot. One of the branches didn't want to bend, so she broke it. To let it hang would have drawn attention to the spot. The space was too bare. Way too bare! But there wasn't time.

At sixty, she started over.

One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...

The camera was in place. She wiggled it.

Too loose, so she wrapped it again. And again.

What a mess!

Her nerves were wound so tightly she could scream, but she had to look. She had to know if they were coming.

Half-expecting to have a heart-attack, she turned and looked through the window with the binoculars. The traffic between the house and the barn was constant now. Men carrying plates, talking, laughing.

But two others, dressed in black, were headed toward the gate. No smiles. No laughter, no chatter. *All focus, no fear.*

"Ssshit!" She tried to step back to judge her attempt to camouflage the camera, but there wasn't enough room. She had to get out of there. They were halfway down the hill. "It will have to do."

She jumped into the back of the van, closed the door, and climbed around into the driver's seat. The van was still on.

But was the camera?

“Shit!” There was no time to check how close the guards were. She opened her driver’s door and jumped out, then fumbled around, looking for the power button. She’d been careful not to cover it with tape when she’d been prepping, but when she’d taped it to the branch, she hadn’t paid attention!

But she remembered where it was.

She took the knife out of her pocket, opened it, then cut away at the tape on the upper right corner. She pressed, but the tape wouldn’t give.

She cut deeper, cut in the other direction, then pressed again. The tape gave, the button compressed. A barely discernible tone started and rose in pitch—audible proof of the camera powering up. But it was drowned out by the sudden whirl of the gate opening.

With her door still open, she slipped into her seat, put the van in gear, and pulled the door closed as she drove forward. The road ended thirty feet ahead, so she calmly made a three-point turn, pretending she didn’t see the men jumping out of the way.

When she was headed in the right direction, she pretended to notice them for the first time and rolled her window down a little. “Just lost! I think I’ve got it now!” Then she calmly drove away.

She barely got a glance at that branch as she passed, but she was moving so fast she couldn’t tell where she’d put the camera. She hoped they couldn’t either.

In case someone tried to follow her, she pulled into the bike shop and parked away from the road, then opened her laptop. If the camera was faced wrong, or not working, she couldn’t possibly go back and fix it in the light of day. And if they’d found it...

She pulled up the feed. It was hard to tell what she was seeing. A black uniform? Something with a hard edge...

The automatic zoom followed movement. It focused and gave Alex a very clear shot of two men in black climbing the rise. The straight edge was the gate in the foreground. The men were moving away!

Alex took a deep breath, then another. She didn’t realize she’d been holding it until she started feeling better.

“James Bond, eat your heart out.”



FATHER DONNE WAS KIND ENOUGH to come to the ranch the next morning. Tulloch waited for him up on the hillside, where they’d built a small shed to serve as their confessional.

“We’ll not need the partition,” Tulloch explained, once they were inside. “I cannae promise ye’ll be of any help, but I must speak to

someone.”

He told the holy man of his unholy gift and felt only vindication when the priest saw it as Tulloch did, as a curse rather than a blessing.

“What a burden it must be,” said the father. “Obviously, I wouldn’t know how to remove it. I would agree with Wickham on this, that God must have had a purpose in mind. From an historical perspective, I must say I’m chuffed to learn I know the Seer of Huntly personally.”

Tulloch went on to explain about the deal he’d offered God, that he’d do his best to lose his second sight if God would send him a plain, incurious woman, and what showed up on his doorstep was just the opposite. When he was finished, he could see the priest was struggling to keep a straight face.

“Father! I’d have thought a man of the cloth would have mastered the ability to hide his amusement.”

The man frowned and nodded emphatically.

“Oh, go on w’ye. Laugh if ye must.”

With permission granted, Father Donne ceased his pretense, and for the next few minutes, he alternately laughed and apologized, apologized and laughed. Eventually, he quieted.

“Got it all out, there, did ye?”

“Tulloch. My dear man. Do ye believe The Almighty approved of this...negotiation?”

After looking back, Tulloch admitted he had not.

“Well, then. I see ye have a choice to make. Obviously, ye cannae be the...average mortal man. So fighting with yer gift is pointless.”

“Aye. I have concluded the same.”

“And I believe ye can stop waitin’ for that homely lass.” The man had to bite his lip momentarily, but he pushed on. “So the only choice to be made here is whether to pursue this beauty and see how she reacts to your secrets. Or...”

“Or?”

“If you do not care too much for her already, ye can end it with her. Send her away.”

“Send her aw—” He gasped. “But Father, what if she willnae go?”

When the holy man had finished laughing, and the tears had been sopped up, he was finally able to speak.

“Tell me, Tulloch—and I ask you sincerely—in which century did you ever meet an *incurious* woman?”

Chapter Thirteen



Thanks to an electronics place called *Groovy Gecko*, Alexandra was able to stream footage from the ranch in real time.

She'd rented the closest Air B&B to the ranch and was pleased to find *Scourguie House* comfortable and clean. A large smart TV hung on the wall which she was able to use as a monitor when cabled to her laptop. And she'd stopped at a little market to stock up on enough food and snackage to last her a week.

The first time she sat down to watch the ranch like some reality TV show, it was kind of exciting, especially since they hadn't found the camera.

"Amateur sleuths, meet amateur spy extraordinaire."

The *twentieth* time she sat down to watch the lifeless gates, it wasn't so exciting. She also had to divvy up her snacks so they would last the week, or on the morning of day two, she would have added ten pounds to her gut and run out of food.

At five in the evening, dressed in her nightshirt and slippers, she'd already switched the TV back to Netflix and had an alarm set on the laptop so it would warn her when there was actual movement. There was only so much grass-growing she could watch.

At ten after, the alarm went off. It was only a little beep, but the excitement was back.

A large black SUV was parked at the gate. Though she couldn't see the numbers, a female hand entered a code that got the gates to open. A new female on the premises?

She quickly switched the cords and had the feedback on the big screen. Then she rewound the footage to watch the vehicle come into view. Not one, but two females! Dark hair. Smiles. And they looked a great deal alike, though their hair was styled differently. Younger than her, but not by much.

Alex was unreasonably excited when the gates finally moved. After all, she'd been staring at them all day.

Just before the SUV reached the house, it pulled off to the left and

parked off screen. When the two walked to the house, the porch filled with little boys and a blond woman. Men exited the barn to watch the hugging rituals, but none of them engaged with the newcomers, and the women and children went into the house.

Alex was frustrated by her inability to follow the men with the camera, but she had to be happy with what she had, or add more cameras. And that just wasn't going to happen. After all she'd spent, it was difficult to justify the cost unless and until she started getting results. Besides, she was happy just to be back in her comfort zone—applying scientific methodology to her problem.

Applying her lips hadn't worked out so well.

Her hypothesis: that paranormal events were happening on the ranch. To prove that hypothesis, she had to observe, measure, and experiment/test, then adjust her hypothesis. It was crucial to keep her assumptions from tainting the results. Already, she worried a lack of Cheetos would soon affect her attitude.

With her screen deserted, she changed the cords and went back to her murder mystery where the British investigators were making wild assumptions with no basis for them. She was debating the cost opportunity of making French toast for dinner when the laptop beeped again.

A small red car pulled up to the gate. When Alex scrolled back, she was shocked to see two familiar faces—or rather, one familiar face attached to two different women. They were the sisters from the tea shop in Edinburgh—the ones who had sent her to the ranch in the first place!

“What the hell?”

A blond man stalked into view when the red car made it to the top of the drive. He offered the women his elbows, then escorted them up the steps where they disappeared into the house. He then went back to their car, forced his tall form inside, then parked the car off screen. He came back into view when he walked around the corner of the barn and ducked back inside. Alex suspected he was quite tall. She would have to look for him in a group setting to verify it.

She assumed that, given the number of people now inside the house, someone would have to come out soon, and she was right. One of the younger, dark-haired women hurried out of the house and down the steps. She brought the large SUV up to the house and opened the back.

Chaos erupted on the porch when the blond woman came out with her boys on her heels. She handed off a suitcase to the first woman, then the hugging ritual began all over again. She finally escaped all the grasping little hands when the two older women wrangled them back inside like herding a small flock of ducks.

The blonde had to be the woman Alex had spoken to on the intercom. She was the gatekeeper—and the gatekeeper was leaving the property with a suitcase!

The vehicle made a three-point turn and headed down the hill, but stopped suddenly. The blond woman got out and ran back up to the barn and disappeared inside. The twins in the car waited. The door sat ajar.

Finally, when the blonde came out, Tulloch was with her. While she rambled and gestured, he shook his head, over and over again. They both glanced at the house, then smiled and waved. He practically had to force her into the car. Then he closed the door and slapped the side twice before stepping back.

Alex realized she'd stopped breathing, then remedied the problem.

Tulloch watched the vehicle descend to the gate, then watched it go. When his gaze returned to the closing gates, she felt like he was staring straight at her, like when he'd watched her from the porch that first day.

He couldn't possibly know she was observing, and yet...

Her breath caught again when he started toward her. No--toward the gate. She had to tell her racing heart he was a mile away. Unless he'd seen the sun glinting off the tiny camera lens, there was no reason for him to go to the tree. Would he be able to see what the others had been blind to? Had she run out of luck so soon?

To convince herself he couldn't hear her, she shouted his name. "See? He didn't even flinch."

And yet, he kept coming. Those dark, mysterious eyes, his face half hidden by his black hair falling forward. No matter how she zoomed, she couldn't read his expression.

And she could no longer sit!

She paced into the kitchen, pulled the eggs out of the fridge, and moved the bread close. But she couldn't stand it. She had to get back to the screen. Considering the noise she made, she was glad there wasn't a room below her.

Tulloch stopped ten feet from the gate and just stared. She checked the time stamp on the corner to make sure the footage hadn't frozen. But it was fine. The seconds ticked away. When she zoomed in again, she could see the rise and fall of his chest.

He finally started moving and came up to the gate. His hands came out between the bars, then made fists. That's when Alex realized he was standing at the same spot as the night before. Was he remembering a kiss?

She could almost see herself standing there with his hands gripping her jacket.

He moved his hands to the bars themselves, just as he'd done

before, and her heart lurched. It hadn't been just a game to him. If he was remembering as clearly as she, it hadn't been so easy to turn her down.

Too bad she couldn't just step out from behind that camera and relive it with him.

After another minute or two, he took a few steps backward, paused, then turned and headed up the hill like he was marching off to war. And Alex couldn't help but feel a little warm and fuzzy, knowing she'd affected him as powerfully as he'd affected her.

So far, the observation stage was going well, but she had yet to witness anything paranormal.

"Come on, people. Show me what you're hiding."

Chapter Fourteen



After an insanely restless night, Tulloch ignored the men stirring around him in the morning and slept like the dead. He woke completely, though unhappily at noon, and trudged to the washhouse with his eyes only half open. It wasn't until he was standing under the hot spray that he remembered how many times he'd wandered down to the gate in the night.

He might have slept better if he'd have rolled up in his kilt and slept there.

No doubt the security guards had noticed, but at least they wouldn't know the reason behind his disquiet.

Father Donne had been little help. He'd erased any hope of an incurious woman from Tulloch's mind, and he had emphasized the real question that must be answered.

Did Tulloch wish to pursue this woman or not?

The immediate answer was no. Thus far, of all the women who had married Culloden men, none of them had been seekers of the paranormal. None had been overly thrilled by the idea of loving a man who had once been dead, let alone roaming the battlefield for nigh three hundred years. But they'd accepted it as a necessary part of who those men were.

Gemma MacTavish called it a "Love me, love my dog" mindset.

And though Alexandra Timmons was somehow more beautiful each time he saw her, she had that mindset backward—Love my dog, love me. She loved his secrets, therefore, she could learn to love him.

No thank you.

When he was finally dressed and had hounded Alwyn for a bite to eat, he decided there wasn't enough left of the day to go searching for his next job. So he went to the porch and sat upon the swing—something he wouldn't have done had Ivy and Wickham been at home. The fact that he could see the gate clearly from that vantage point hadn't been his intention.

Lorraine and Loretta had taken the two wee laddies to the park

while they waited for the older laddie, Alexander, to finish with school. So the house behind him was quiet as well. Since he had nothing else to occupy his mind, and he knew not where Alexandra, the woman, might be, he closed his eyes and cast a wide net, reaching out with his senses with a light touch.

It was just a test, he told himself, to see if he might hit that wall.

It wasn't long before his chest deflated, crushed by a coming grief that would break a multitude of hearts. Not nearly as devastating as Culloden, but enough to wrench many a heart and soul.

The sisters had taken Ivy's caravan. The minibus was out with lunchtime rounds. The only two vehicles were Wickham's truck and the sisters' small red car. Tulloch fairly flew to the key box and grabbed. He'd pulled out the truck keys, so he rushed to the driver's side and opened the door.

Problem was, he had no ken how to drive!

With what he'd witnessed and studied other men do, he might have managed, but time was critical.

He turned toward the barn, filled his lungs, and shouted with all his might, "To me! To me!"

Five seconds later, men came running from all directions. Once they saw who had cried out, they came even faster. He hated to worry the half dozen on the ranch that day, when he only needed one, but he knew they'd understand.

"Who can drive? And drive fast?"

Forbes ran flat out and didn't slow when he heard the question. He just raised his hand, shouted, "Yo," and took the keys from Tulloch's outstretched hand. Someone hit the start button for the gate, and the path was clear by the time they reached the bottom of the hill.

"Where do we go?"

"Into town. I will know more when we get close."

Forbes drove sure and fast. Tulloch braced himself with an arm on the back of the seat and a firm grip on a handle in front of him, all the while concentrating on what was to come.



ALEXANDRA WASN'T sure what she was watching, so she rewound the footage and replayed it again and again. Tulloch had gone from staring at the gate, to jumping up and running off the left-hand side of the screen. Soon after, he shouted, and half a dozen men abandoned what they were doing and ran to the same spot. At first, she was hysterical, thinking he'd hurt himself and was calling for help. But then the truck had appeared with him in it.

No matter how many times she watched, she couldn't see any

blood. The man driving him was the same man who had come to her table at the Chinese restaurant. And though Tulloch braced himself for the turn, she honestly couldn't guess what the problem was.

A broken leg?

She studied his face. He looked upset, but not grimacing in pain.

She jumped up and paced so she could think. She could try to distract herself until he came back on screen, or...or she could find him. The hospital might be a good place to start looking. Better yet, she could wait inside the city limits for that truck. At the speed they were going, they should be passing her turn off in just a few minutes. She could follow along.

There was no debate. She was already reaching for the keys.



ALEXANDRA PULLED onto the main road into the city, then quickly pulled to the side. She would wait five minutes, then assume she'd missed him. At that point, she'd find the local hospital and hope *not* to find him there.

Her heart jumped when the blue and white truck sped past. It jumped again at the sight of Tulloch. At least he was still upright.

She pulled back into the road and sped up as much as she dared. But thankfully, there was a red light ahead that would give her a chance to make up some distance. The brake lights came on, the truck stopped, but when the coast was clear, it took off again and turned left. She suspected Scottish driving laws were drastically different until she reached the intersection and heard the cars honking. A few shaking fists in the truck's direction said she was wrong.

She had no choice but to stop. At least she had the general direction. But with the way they were driving, she doubted she'd find them again.

With the urgency gone, she turned left at the intersection and continued in that direction. She looked both ways while slowing through intersections, but saw no signs of the blue and white pickup. So she turned down a side road and pulled over to park in the first empty spot, just before the next corner.

Alex grabbed her phone to find directions to the nearest hospital, but the sight of a kilt caught her eye. And unless he had a twin, she would swear it was Tulloch standing about twenty feet beyond the opposite corner. His friend hurried up the street toward him. She assumed he'd dropped Tulloch off, then parked the truck.

But why? What was the hurry? He'd driven like a bat out of Hell and ran a red light just so Tulloch could stand there? With a pub at his back, she could only assume he'd been desperate for a beer. But they

didn't go inside.

The two men put their heads together. Tulloch did the talking. Then the other man nodded and backed away. In the end, he stood against the building another ten feet farther down the street.

Tulloch looked up and down the road like he was expecting someone, but without knowing from which direction they'd come. Considering the way his friend stood back and gave him room, Alex wondered if Tulloch would break out in song or something as soon as a crowd gathered.

A few minutes later, men came from both directions. They gave Tulloch only a glance before entering the bar. And Tulloch didn't seem any more interested in them.

Alex slid her seat back as far as she could, hoping to blend in a little with the shadowed interior of the cargo van. Then she set her phone to record video and lifted it just high enough over the steering wheel to clear the camera lens. If she watched him on the little screen, she could keep her face down and draw less attention.

Tulloch slapped his arms to get warm, shifted his weight from foot to foot, and briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them, he stood still, suddenly calm. Then he nodded at his friend, who pushed away from the wall, but stayed where he was.

Alex had to remind herself to breathe. Hopefully, what was about to happen wasn't illegal, or worse, violent. The two just looked so... aggressive! And if they did something terrible, she might have to jump out and stop them. But with what?

The knife!

She reached into the box between the seats where she'd left the brown duct tape. The pocketknife was there. She picked it up and showed it to the phone, still recording. "I really hope I don't have to use this."

Tulloch turned his head to the side, listening. Then he looked down the street, turned to his right, and squared his shoulders--arms out, like a ball player expecting to be rushed.

Alex rolled her window down all the way and listened. A dog barked, then barked again. Other than that, nothing.

Tulloch leaned forward and down. Ready for who knows what... and a tiny little puppy headed between his legs. He scooped it up like it was the most important thing in the world. The puppy whimpered, then licked his face. He pulled it close and wrapped his arms around it.

His friend frowned, but stood still. Distracted by the dog, Tulloch turned toward the van, so Alex ducked her head and went back to watching on her phone.

A little boy, maybe five or six years old, ran up to Tulloch,

grinning from ear to ear. She couldn't understand him he was speaking so fast, but she caught the gist. He was happy Tulloch had caught his dog.

Even though the boy held out his arms to take the puppy, Tulloch kept it. The boy chattered away for a bit, then lifted his hands higher, obviously asking for the dog. In response, Tulloch stepped back away from the road and nodded for the boy to follow. It seemed reasonable then, that he was trying to get the boy away from the road. But he still wouldn't give up the dog.

The boy finally put his hands on his hips and tried to be a tough guy, but clearly, he was on the edge of tears.

And still, Tulloch held the puppy. He seemed a little distracted, like he wasn't even listening to the kid anymore.

"What an ass," she said, not caring if he overheard.

The bar door opened and a man straddled the threshold. He said something to Tulloch. Obviously, he'd been watching through the window because he nodded at the puppy, then gestured toward the boy, who was now crying for real.

"Shut it," Tulloch barked, and tilted his head, like he was listening again. Did he think the puppy was talking to him?

The man went back inside. The little boy cried harder and Alex reached for the door handle. But just then, the bar door opened again, and three bruisers, all bald, took turns squeezing out the doorway.

"Oh, you're in trouble now." Alex started recording again, but she watched out the window, no longer caring if he recognized her.

Tulloch didn't look concerned as much as irritated. They surrounded him, and finally his friend came to his rescue, pulling the closest man aside and trying to reason with him. One of the men leaned down to hear the little boy's complaint, and the third man put his hand on Tulloch's shoulder, trying to force the Highlander to face him.

In unison, all heads turned to look down the street. From her position, Alex couldn't see, but she could hear the roar of a big engine, the peel of tires.

The puppy was forgotten while the men watched. The engine roared again. Wheels screeched before the car even got to the corner, and it moved so fast, Alex got a glance at little more than red and black flames painted on white. As soon as the back end swung into place, it took off again. The engine was so loud, she dropped her phone to cover her ears.

The men surrounding Tulloch moved, but he wasn't standing any longer. He squatted down to speak with the boy at his own eye level. Very carefully, he took the dog away from his chest and held it against the boy's until the little arms had secured their package. He ruffled

the child's hair, murmured something, and the little guy escaped back down the street so fast he must have worried Tulloch would change his mind and want the dog again.

When Alex looked back at Tulloch, he was shaking hands with the three men. The first man who'd only dared to take a step out of the bar—came out again. And the three men quickly told him what happened. Alex couldn't hear them well, but she understood the sign language. They were quite animated, insisting that the boy and the dog might have been killed had Tulloch not been holding tight to that puppy.

"Just like that? From asshole to hero?"

The gestures that followed were all too easy to understand. Everyone wanted to buy Tulloch a drink, and it looked like his friend was only too happy to join them. But as the men paraded into the bar, she noticed Tulloch held back.

His attention was on her. After just staring for a minute, he shook his head at her, like she'd done something wrong.

"So you caught me," she said, through the windshield. "So what?"

He gave a little shrug, then lifted his hand and very deliberately waved his fingers, all together, three times. It was "*Bye Felicia*" in sign language.

She reached out the window and flipped him off, distinctly, three times.

Chapter Fifteen



Alexandra was so distracted driving back to her B&B, she had a hard time remembering which side of the road she was supposed to be on. But eventually, she got there. She honestly didn't know what possessed her to flip off Tulloch. He just had a talent for frustrating her.

She willed her mind to go blank, and she sat behind the wheel for a long time, thinking nothing at all. Finally, she went inside because she had to pee. Though it was still the middle of the afternoon, she got back into her night shirt and slippers. Then she rifled through her supplies and tried to decide what to make for dinner. Eventually, she acknowledged she was just putting off the inevitable, so she wrapped a soft blanket around herself, sat on the bed, and brought the video footage up on her phone.

By the third time through it, she stopped calling Tulloch an asshole and started seeing what was really going on. By the fifth time, she knew he wasn't ignoring the child or the first man from the bar. He was listening for the car.

Like he knew it was coming.

Just like he knew the puppy was coming.

Just like he knew...everything...ahead of time.

"Okay, okay." She got up, fixed herself a drink and a bowl of peanuts and chocolate chips to make sure she was thinking straight.

Yep. She was.

"All environments normal."

She pinched herself, to make sure she was awake.

"Subject is alert."

She pulled up the video again but set the phone aside without turning it on. She didn't need to watch it again. She had the facts.

"He knew what was going to happen."

The question was, did he plan it for the sake of...who? Her? He didn't know she'd be watching.

She could have believed it was planned if it all played out in front

of the ranch camera. She would have assumed someone had discovered the device, and they were playing her. But they hadn't even tried to stay within sight, after that red light. They hadn't known which street she'd choose to park on. And they hadn't left that blue truck where she would find it.

Pretty lame planning if they'd planned it. And to get her in the right spot would have taken more luck than was plausible.

But assuming they *had* been lucky, assuming they'd planned it all, why would they do it? Why would they play her like that? Just for fun? Have someone drive at full speed through the streets of Inverness, risking lives, just to have a little fun with a tourist?

It made absolutely no sense.

She got up, grabbed some licorice, and paced around the flat while she tried to think of alternative motivations. It took so much muscle to bite off a piece, she might have loosened some teeth. So she chucked it into the garbage.

"There are no alternatives," she told her reflection in the living room window. "He knew what was going to happen."

She turned on the television, then her laptop, and brought up the live stream of the ranch. Two men stood at the gate, watching the road.

"What a jerk! He didn't even call them to tell them...everything was okay."

She scrolled back through the recording and found the spot where the jerk in question was sitting on the porch looking toward the camera. The camera caught the movement and zoomed in as Tulloch closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he grimaced in pain, then jumped straight from the porch to the ground, skipping all the steps and running flat out, off the left side of the screen.

She turned the volume completely up. There would be shouting soon—

"To me! To me!"

It was his voice. Distraught, not low and sexy, but the same voice.

She watched the faces of the men who came running without question. Tulloch's friend from the restaurant looked as grim as death as he ran. There was so little time between that moment and when the truck pulled into view. No time to stop and ask questions.

They all trusted him.

They came when he called.

No one stopped to question.

Tulloch knew what might happen to the boy and the puppy...and everyone on the ranch accepted his foreknowledge.

Alex wrapped the blanket around her again, but didn't hide from the truth as it came.

“They drove like mad because he knew. They ran the red light because he knew. He braced himself like a ball player because he knew...a puppy was coming.” *And he had to catch it. Or a crazy driver might come out of nowhere and hit a little boy.*

Alex got up again, dried her eyes, and sat down at the desk. On her laptop, she searched the internet for “male witches.” As it turned out...*it’s a thing.*

She came to Scotland to find something to prove she had a soul, and to stir that soul.

Mission accomplished. But what next?

If she went back to her scientific method, it was time to form a testable explanation, make a prediction, and test the prediction. And to do that, she had to get onto that ranch...



TULLOCH HAD every intention of getting drunk, but he had to stay on his toes. The non-incurious woman was still out there and she knew where to find him. It didn’t matter that she’d flashed him a rude gesture and driven off in a huff. She might change her mind and come back. And he truly didn’t wish to be there if she did.

He moved around the table to shake Forbes’ shoulder. “Come. I must get back to the ranch.”

“Why?” He pointed to the waitress bringing a large pitcher of beer and a stack of glasses.

“That woman was out there, sitting in a van, watching what happened with the laddie.”

His friend grinned and bobbed his eyebrows. “Stalking ye, is she?”

“I would believe it, but how would she ken to find me here?”

Forbes sobered, then held up his hand and shook his head at the beer passed his way. “Forgive us. We must away. We thank ye for the offer, lads.”

They suffered through another round of handshakes, then hurried out the door. There was no sign of the van.

“Do ye suppose she saw us in town and followed?”

“Must have,” he said. “Perhaps when we turned that corner under the red light. That drew much attention. Not that I am complainin’.”

“That’s it.” Forbes looked relieved, but only briefly. “Is it a bad thing if that beauty fancies ye? Have ye seen something in the future than warns ye off?”

“Nay. What she seeks is a circus performer. I dinnae do tricks.”

Forbes nodded, then grinned as he opened the door of the truck. “Still, she’s a beautiful audience. What will ye do if she comes to the ranch again? Do ye check the gate at ten o’clock each night, on the

chance—”

“I do not,” he said, and it was true. Of the four times he had gone to the gate in the past twenty-four hours, none was at ten o’clock.

Chapter Sixteen



The next day, Alexandra prepped. She'd rented the Air B&B for two weeks, just in case. So she left a note on top of her laptop that read, *"If I am missing, please find the live stream on this laptop. Initial password is 'Witches789.' If the camera dies, access to the recorded video can be found in a desktop file named, 'Don't let them get me.'"*

She put a few necessities in her small backpack that passed as a purse, ate some lunch, then took out the garbage. With all that done, she drove the van to the motorcycle shop, offered to pay the manager to let her park the van on his lot for a day or two, then set out walking.

Up until the very last minute, she'd scanned the feed for any sign of the gatekeeper returning. Unless she'd come home in the past hour, the people hopefully manning the gate controls were the two women who had sent her to the ranch in the first place.

Witches, she was sure of it. She just had to prove it.

A hundred yards before she reached the gate, she took off her comfortable shoes and traded them for heels. Heels might earn her a little pity, and if someone was on the fence, a little pity might push them her way.

"Poor girl. Look at what she's had to walk in." She chuckled, then continued toward the gate, trying to appear weary. She glanced at the camera, then checked her watch. "Quarter to two on a Friday," she said aloud.

She took a deep breath to help calm down, but it left her nauseated. She just had to get this first part over with.

She pushed the red button and spoke, "Hello?"

"Hello, Alexandra. You can cut the crap. We're buzzing you in."

She didn't know which sister it was, but Grandma Lorena would have liked her.



TULLOCH WAS HALLUCINATING.

He actually imagined the form of Alexandra Timmons walking up the drive—*inside* the gate!

He and J.W. had taken a pony out of the corral to a patch of grass hidden by the shed. So he called the boy to him. “Look to the road, there, and tell me what ye see. Anyone?”

“Nay, sir.”

He patted the lad, then sent him back to finish brushing his pony. The wee beast was happy to lie down and nibble while the boy fussed over him.

J.W. picked up the brush and pointed it at the hallucination. “Unless ye count the lady.”

The dry stem Tulloch had been chewing fell from his mouth, but he said nothing, deciding it best if he did not draw her attention. He sidestepped to hide himself better and watched to see what she might do.

Had someone opened the gate for her? Or had she found a way over the fence?

High and mighty as you please, she strolled barefoot up the center strip of grass with strappy shoes dangling from her fingertips. She paused not at all, but marched up the steps to the house. The door opened as she approached, and she entered without missing a step.

Apparently, the sisters were expecting her!

Wickham’s warning whispered in his head. *Just be wary. They’re a shifty lot.*

THE SECOND THE door closed behind Alexandra, the toddler came and wrapped his arms around her leg, held on tight, and laughed. He was a heavy little bugger, so she wasn’t going anywhere.

While her eyes adjusted, someone fussed with her hair. One of the sisters stood in front of her, looking her over.

“Very nice, dear,” she said. “Lorraine, leave her hair alone. Alexandra, you need to change back into your sensible shoes right away.”

They peeled the boy off her leg and prodded her toward the couch in the living room. She obediently took out her boots and put them on. Then folded her arms. “I have questions.”

Lorraine laughed. “Oh, no, dear. We’re not allowed to answer those.”

“You’re not allowed to confirm that you’re witches?”

The other sister nodded. “You mean us? Yes, we can answer questions about us.”

Someone knocked on the door. Lorraine went to answer it. “Look who it is!” She stepped back to reveal the Highlander at the door. It

was Tulloch. Thankfully, he was wearing jeans this time, so she wasn't distracted by his knees. He wore a thermal shirt with unbuttoned, quilted plaid shirt over top. She recognized it as his lumberjack outfit from the Chinese restaurant.

Alex hoped he didn't realize she'd accidentally dressed to match, though her shirt wasn't quilted, and she wore her black leather jacket to keep the humidity away from her body.

She smiled and raised a hand, held her fingers together, and waved three times.

He wasn't amused.

"We've promised Alexandra here that she could have a tour of the ranch," said the sister. "Since you have no urgent plans, Tulloch, would you mind doing the honors? Be sure to bring her back for supper tonight and introduce her to all our bachelors. Alwyn's making something special."

The man stepped just inside the door and closed it quickly so the baby didn't get out. Then he turned the little guy around and headed him off in a new direction. "Ladies, I must tell ye that Ivy already dismissed this woman from the gates—"

"Yes, dear. We're rectifying that. We sent her here."

"She's a client," Lorraine said.

He scowled. "Client? What service do ye perform for clients?"

The sisters laughed, then spoke as one. "Matchmaking, of course."



TULLOCH BACKED out of the house quickly. At the same time, the sisters pushed Alexandra at him. As soon as her feet cleared the threshold, the door slammed behind her.

He looked down at a wide-eyed J.W. whom he'd left playing with a kitten on the porch. "Ye wish to go inside or stay with me?"

Before the laddie could answer, the door opened again and one of the sisters snatched him up. "Time for a snack, J.W.," she said. "Let's let these two have some privacy."

"I ken what privacy means," the lad announced too all within hearing. The door snapped closed with a bit more force this time.

Tulloch thought he'd be wise and leave the woman sitting alone on the porch if only to remove himself from temptation. But he couldn't treat her churlishly in his own home, especially after he'd stood toe to toe with her at the gate. And though he was inclined to catch her by the jacket again and relive that night, it would make him the worst sort of scoundrel when he had no intention of wooing and winning her.

Ultimately, another man would claim her. Damn him anyway.

He offered his elbow to help her down the steps. She took it without thought, as if she were used to men behaving like gentlemen.

He pointed at the path that would take them up the hillside. "Matchmaking, eh? I thought ye were looking for miracles and the like."

She shook her head of perfect curls, and he waited eagerly to hear her voice again. She'd been silent thus far, and the day before...well, the day before, she'd only spoken with the one finger.

"No reply?" He chuckled. "How very diplomatic of ye. Now I shall believe ye are mysterious, compelling."

She rolled her eyes heavenward, then bit her bottom lip. He had to glance away from the sight, just to prove he could.

"I assume you know those two are witches."

He shrugged. It wasn't his place to confirm her suspicions about others.

"Oh, I see. Mysterious and compelling. Got it. But aren't you also a witch?"

He inhaled sharply and looked to see if she might be teasing him. She appeared sincere.

"Why would ye say such a thing?"

She leaned toward him slightly. "I was there, yesterday, remember?"

Oh, he remembered. "Horrible shock, that. Someone might have been killed—"

"Someone or something."

He bobbed his brows. "Perhaps...both."

She gasped. "Really?"

He enjoyed surprising her. In fact, he enjoyed teasing her and watching her emotions change. So he played coy. "I can only assume."

She bumped her shoulder into his. "Yeah, right. You knew."

He stopped and turned to face her. Only then did he realize she'd never released his elbow, and they'd covered a bit of distance. "Aye, lass. I knew. I...*sometimes*...am given the gift of Sight."

The ease with which the truth flew out of his mouth startled him. Alexandra Timmons, however, didn't appear surprised in the least.

"Ye find it so easy to believe, do ye?"

"Easy? Are you kidding? I tried all night to prove it wasn't true. But I have it on video. And I could find no other, plausible explanation. Unless you want to offer one."

"I see it hasnae endeared me to ye."

"Endeared you?" She shook her head. "It helped a little, I guess. Let's just say it took you out of the asshole column."

He choked on a laugh. "May I ask into what column am I consigned?"

She struggled not to smile, then failed. "At the moment, you're holding in *jerk*."

He turned back to the path and started walking again. She followed suit, but they were no longer touching, and he missed the warmth of her.

He waited for her to catch up before he quipped, "I am beginning to see why you found it necessary to enlist the services of matchmakers, Miss Timmons."

While she gasped and sputtered, Tulloch glanced over his shoulder at the men shoring up the roof on the small barn. Monroe, Barclay, and Graham. Shirts off. Sweat dripping despite the cool weather. Heathens all. None of them would suit her.

Fenton came out of the wash house wearing only a towel, which he secured a bit tighter around his hips once he noticed there was company afoot. As he passed them on the path, the grinning man offered a wee bow and begged her pardon. She laughed behind her hand, hiding the better part of a brilliant smile.

"Dinnae encourage Fenton or we shall all regret it."

Just the thought of introducing her to the rest of the men made him feel ill.

Chapter Seventeen



Alexandra resisted the urge to stomp her foot and whine and counted to ten instead. She took a calming breath and pasted a smile on her face.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Tulloch, but those women lied to you. I didn't hire them to play matchmakers on my behalf. I bought some tea—or rented a cup—or whatever. And I paid for a little advice. That's all. That's it. They said nothing about..." Uh, oh.

"Nothing about?"

She laughed lightly. "Well, they did say if I gave them fifty buck total, they'd give me the address of...uh..."

"*This* address?"

"The address of my true love, they said." She rolled her eyes. "I told them I wasn't interested."

"But they did give you *this* address."

"Yes, but not to find you—or, or anyone else for that matter. They said I'd find, you know, proof of miracles or magic, or something." She groaned. "You make me sound like a spoiled child."

"I believe it's the whingin' that does that."

"Whinging?"

"Aye. Means the same as *whining*."

Her mouth fell open, and when she couldn't seem to close it, she put her hand on his shoulder and shoved.

He exaggerated his response, pretending to lose his balance, and when he finally landed on the grass, he was twenty feet away.

"Everythin' sortin' out, there, Tulloch?" A man stood in the doorway of a Quonset hut, polishing something in his hand with a black cloth.

Tulloch got up and brushed off his knees. "All sorted, McGillivray."

"Who's this then?"

"Ye'll meet her at supper." He marched back to her side, put his hand on her upper arm, and got them moving again.

The man with the cloth grinned at her and nodded. She smiled

back, but Tulloch adjusted his stride so he blocked her view.

"Keep movin'," he muttered. "That's it."

"He one of those bachelors the sisters were talking about?"

"I believe he's spoken for," he said, but his ears went red.

She was sure he was lying, and made a mental note to test that theory.

The path narrowed after that, so they moved closer out of necessity. There were ATV tracks that cut across it here and there, or ran alongside it.

"Careful through here," he said, and caught her hand.

She watched her step, but the only danger was a smattering of large rocks that all lay to the sides of the path. And even when the rocks were behind them, he kept her hand. She thought the action was charming, and boyish, and she wouldn't have pulled her hand away for the world.

The trees grew thicker the higher they went. Then suddenly, they came to a small shed at the edge of a forest. This one had a high-pitched roof that made it look comical. Or maybe it was the fact that the windows looked like eyes.

"A playhouse?"

He made a face, then bit his lip briefly before he answered. "Nay. Just an all purpose sort of place. Would ye like to see inside? We could...take a wee break from the breeze at least."

Alex wasn't sure what he was lying about, but those ears went even redder than the first time.

"Sounds good to me. As long as...well, you know the other night?"

"At the gate?"

"Yeah. It might have been the late hour, or the darkness, but if you would have let me in, I honestly wouldn't have, you know, gone in that shed with you. I might have lost my head for a minute but...it wouldn't have gone any further.

He nodded. "I understand." He pulled on a leather loop sticking out of the wall beside the door and the door popped open. He let her go in first, then pulled the door shut and lifted another leather strip that caused the door to latch. The whole set up looked medieval.

She moved across the narrow room to look out a window. And though the place only had a couple of chairs and a table with a partition down the middle of it, she would have loved having a place like this to play as a child.

There was yet another leather loop hanging beside the window, and she touched it.

"Go ahead lass. Pull it."

She did, and a long piece of rolled up cloth perched above the window unfurled and blocked out the light. There was still light

coming in from the second window, but not much.

Tulloch stepped up close from behind, put his hands on her hips, and leaned forward to whisper against the side of her neck. “Ye said something about the darkness making ye lose yer head?”

The chills rushing through her veins was like a drug she didn’t know she’d been craving. But she didn’t want him to get the wrong idea, so she held her ground as long as she could. When he turned her to face him, she couldn’t fight it. And when he bent to kiss her, she was already on her toes, waiting for him.

She thought they’d been kissing through the bars.

That wasn’t kissing.

This. This was kissing.

She thought making out in the darkness had been the hottest experience of her life, and until they’d stepped in that shed, it had been. But being able to see him, to watch the man lose his senses—all because of her—gave her a rush no one had ever explained before.

I did this. He’s my puppet now. He’ll do anything I ask...

But since she was his puppet as well, she was careful not to start something neither of them might be able to stop.

He began kissing down the side of her neck, and she searched desperately for a distraction. Something on the wall caught her eye. “What is that?”

“What?” He didn’t look up.

“That. On the wall.”

He sucked in a breath against her tongue-wet skin, and it felt like a blast chiller. Then he chuckled and straightened. “Show me.”

She pointed to the narrow barrel attached to the far end of the wall.

“That’s water. Unless it isn’t.”

“Unless it isn’t? That’s pretty high for anyone to...pee into.”

His laugh was more of a bark. “I meant it might be whisky, lass. In a forest, we have no need to relieve ourselves indoors.”

She pressed her face against him to hide her embarrassment, but while she held tight against him, she heard how hard his heart pounded. And before she let her ego go crazy again, she pushed away, retreating until she bumped against that far wall. Standing closer to the uncovered window, she had plenty of light and tried to figure out how it would work. There was a tin cup tied to the odd barrel, and a spout at the bottom.

She knocked on the side and could tell it was at least half full. But of what?

“There is a hole at the top for air, with a cork in it. Lift the cork briefly, but have the cup at the ready, for it will release fast. Replace the plug quickly and surely.”

She tried not to think of how often that cup had not been washed. Once it was in position, she reached up, found the cork, and lifted. Even though she pushed the cork down fast, water sprayed into the cup and out again, splashing all over her.

“Water. Thank goodness.” She turned to find Tulloch making a face.

“Ye dinnae care for whisky?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think whisky would have helped us get out of here.” With the cup nearly half full of extremely cold water, she pulled it back and threw the water at him. Sadly, she hadn’t considered the limited length of the string, and the cup stopped short, turned, and splashed the water in her face and on the exposed skin of her chest.

She screamed.

Tulloch laughed.

And others came running.

Chapter Eighteen



By the time those footfalls reached the shed, Tulloch and the woman were laughing deliriously, seated outside on the grass. Alex sat in the only sunny spot large enough to accommodate her, hoping in vain that it would warm and dry her.

He knew that scream would bring the lads running, and he wasn't fool enough to be caught in the shed with her, giving tongues a reason to wag.

Six of them came, and listened to Alexandra tell the tale.

That damnably handsome McHenish moved toward her, sniffing like a hungry dog, damn him. "Ye mean it wasn't whisky?"

Forbes hung his head. "Nay. Father Donne asked that we stop fillin' it with anything but water."

Tulloch gave his friend a slight shake of his head, hoping he'd not mention the priest again. But he could see in the woman's expression, her curiosity had been piqued.

"Father Donne?" A single brow lifted. "You mean a priest comes up here?"

"Aye," Fenton answered. "We thought it best to build the confessional away from the busy yard. I for one get a might loud from time to time, and I wouldn't want this lot bettin' on how many Hail Mary's I've earned!"

Everyone laughed. Everyone but Alexandra.

She quirked her eyebrow and leveled Tulloch with a look. "That's a confessional?"

He nodded. "Aye. Though it has been used for other things, sure."

Fenton snorted. "A quiet place for the father to have a lie in, maybe!"

Tulloch jumped to his feet and reached down to help Alexandra stand, but she turned away from him and reached out to McHenish instead. She had nothing but smiles for the pretty man, and nothing but silence for him.

While their unwelcome escorts marched them down the hillside,

she said nothing about the near-desecration of the shed, and for that, he was grateful. If his punishment was to watch her chatting away with McHenish, he considered it just.

By the time they reached the Quonset hut, however, he considered them even. So he hurried forward and snatched up her hand. She gave him a narrow look, but allowed him the liberty.

Fenton stopped short. The others followed suit. He pointed to their entwined hands. "We were told the lass was up for grabs. We'll thank ye not to play patty fingers until we've all been introduced at supper."

Alexandra snatched her hand away, then put both hands on her hips. "I don't know where you're getting your information, but there will be no grabbing, period."

The men nodded and laughed, repeating, "No grabbing." "No grabbing." "Hands to yerself!" They would have done Monty Python proud.

Eventually, the six of them waved, winked, or blew kisses at the lass before parading down to the barn. Tulloch needed little imagination, and even less Sight, to know that supper was going to be a fiasco.

"If ye'll deign to take my hand again, my lady, I ken where we might go where we willnae be followed."

She rubbed her arms and bunched her shoulders. "Is it inside? I think I've had enough fresh cold air for one afternoon."

"Then this will please ye."

She reached for his open hand, but hesitated. "This isn't another dark shed, is it?"

"Ye'll see."



ALEXANDRA WAS suspicious when Tulloch led her to the long, low building from which the guy in the towel had come.

"This is the wash house. No females allowed but for a lass who comes to play barber every month or so." He led her past the door and around the end of the building. In back, about twenty feet from the back door, was another shed, about eight by ten feet. This one looked sturdier, made from a reddish-brown wood with a serious roof on it. More professionally made than the one they used for a confessional.

He opened the door and stood back. "'Tis a sauna. Always a little warm, but we needn't turn it on."

"I'm keeping my clothes on."

"I shall as well." He encouraged her to take a seat near the door, where there was more light coming through the glass. He moved to the opposite end and climbed up to the top bench. "A safe distance,

aye?"

The wood absorbed any echo and made it seem like they were sitting much closer than they were. And it was warm enough she was able to take off her coat.

"I've never used a sauna before. I live in Arizona, so just going outside does the same thing. Makes you sweat and gasp. All for free."

"They are popular in Scotland. Hot dry air is a treat. And in the winter months, we will alternate between the heat in here and the snow outside."

"You sit in the snow?"

"Some do. Some of us run and jump and dive into it, when its depth is sufficient. When we've cooled, we come back into the heat. The shock is quite refreshing."

His choice of words made him sound like he was from the previous century, and she might have asked about it, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

The soft feeling to the air, the acoustics, the shadows—she might have been anywhere in the world, it was that unreal. And for a minute, she struggled to remember what brought her to that exact time and place. She'd come looking for something unexplainable, paranormal. And technically, the video was proof enough of it. She really hadn't needed more. She could have moved on.

No. The real reason she'd come back to the ranch with hopes of getting through the gate...was sitting across the room, in the shadows, staring at her.

He finally looked away, took off his quilted shirt, and folded it up. He used it for a pillow and stretched out along that top bench and stared at the close ceiling instead of her. Since he looked comfortable, she did the same.

"Can we talk about your...second sight?"

He sighed, as if he'd been dreading the subject. "Aye."

"You said you were *sometimes* gifted. Does that mean you can't use it anytime you want to?"

"I meant that I cannot see ahead of my own life. And some others. There is no sense to it. And if I had my druthers, I would be rid of it completely."

"I thought about it a lot last night. I wouldn't want it either. I mean, it's probably gratifying to know when you might have saved a life. Or many lives. But it must be horrifying when you're dealing with adults who won't listen. I mean, that little boy had no choice. You had his puppy and he had to wait for you to give it back. Adults probably fight you if you can't give them a very good reason to change their plans."

"Aye. Just so."

“Too bad you can’t see your own future, though. As compensation.”

“I suppose ye’ll want me to tell ye what’s in store for ye?”

“At first, that’s exactly what I thought I wanted. But no. I don’t think so. I don’t think human beings were programed for that. If bad luck is coming, I might get terribly depressed about it. And if something wonderful is going to happen, I might get my hopes up too far and be disappointed. Or I might mess it up. I think I’d rather be surprised, either way, and deal with it when it’s time.”

He swung his legs off the bench and sat up, his mouth agape, his hands braced to each side of his knees. “Ye mean it? Ye havenae come to discover how my gift can help ye?”

She couldn’t look him in the eye, so she stared at the ceiling and played with the button on her shirt. “I was just thinking about that too. I thought I’d come to verify what I already knew. I’m a scientist. That’s what we do. But that’s not really why I had to get through that gate.”

“Tell me.”

“And it wasn’t just to prove I could.” She grinned. “Though that is a bonus.”

“Go on,” he whispered.

“I wanted to test another hypothesis...to see if all we had between us was chemistry.”

He sighed. “And thanks to my bullying at the confessional, all I’ve done is prove the chemistry.”

She laughed. “Well, I guess we did that, didn’t we? But I suppose I’ll just have to come out and ask you if...if you feel something more than that. Or if this has just been a chance for some fun, with a tourist, and after I leave town, you plan to resume your regular life.”

“First of all, Alexandra, I think it best that ye sit up again or we’ll be testing that chemistry, and our willpower, all over again.”

She seriously considered tempting fate, but eventually sat up. His smirk told her he knew what she’d been thinking.

“Secondly, I do not, nor shall I ever, have a normal life. And thirdly, I have suffered an unhealthy obsession with that blasted gate ever since that night, and I am reasonably certain it isn’t all to do with the kissing.”

“I know. Four times in one night? I was hoping it was me you were looking for. Then I worried you might have had four dates who never showed.”

“Alexandra?”

“What?”

“How could ye ken I went to the gate four times?”

Chapter Nineteen



If the swift passage of time was proof of being with the one you loved, then Alexandra was definitely in love.

She would guess Tulloch had been trying to get her last secret out of her for about ten minutes when an old fashioned, Bonanza-type dinner bell sounded.

"Dinner? Already? I thought it was about four o'clock." She got up and moved to the door and pulled her jacket on. He was suddenly behind her, helping, then holding her jacket off her shoulder so he could drop a kiss there.

"We call the evening meal supper, and it is six o'clock. But first," he kissed her again, "ye must give me yer secret."

She pulled her jacket over that shoulder to cut off his access to it and pushed the sauna door open. "You're going to have to work harder than that for it, laddie." She spun to face him. "Wait a minute. Don't you think it's time you told me your full name?"

He tapped her on the nose. "Ye must work harder than that for it, lassie."

She turned her back and hurried away. "I guess I'll just have to call you Tulloch forever!"

When he caught up to her, he pulled her back against him, and they walked like a four-legged zombie for a minute.

"Ah, Alexandra. Forever sounds much better than it used to."

She squeezed his arms against her and enjoyed the chills invoked by all those rolling r's. As they neared the barn, she stepped out of his embrace so they could walk normally. The fact that they were holding hands was missed by no one, not even J.W.

The three-year-old came up to Tulloch and tapped on their intertwined fingers. "See? *This* is what happens after privacy."

He led her to the garage, which she thought was strange until she saw the interior. It had been turned into a professional kitchen that looked good enough for even Gordon Ramsay to use. The man running the show wore a white coat. His head was bald, so maybe he didn't

need the hat. When Tulloch introduced her to him, he spoke so fast and so strangely, she only picked up a word or two, but his smile and nod was enough to make her feel welcomed.

The kitchen smelled divine. And while she watched, giant pans full of food were cleaned out in no time. The plates were filled with portions big enough to feed small families, and she caught Tulloch eyeing her, then her plate, estimating his chances of getting a little extra.

The barn had rows of massive bunk beds near the back, and the front had four long tables set up in two rows. Altogether, there were over twenty people sitting at the table at once, with room for another ten if everyone squished together.

Tulloch introduced her to MacTavish and his new wife, Gemma, a pretty woman in her forties who seemed comfortably familiar with Tulloch and a few of the others.

Someone banged on a table three times and all eating stopped for a few minutes while someone said grace. Though the whole prayer was recited in Gaelic, she was sure she heard *Miss Timmons* and *Tulloch* in there at the end.

After the meal was over, she and Tulloch stood with their backs against the wall so the other men could stream past. Everyone was introduced properly, and the men who had laughed and teased so gleefully that afternoon were now on their best behavior. A few stood out, but the only name she really wanted to hear was Tulloch's. Though she asked some of the others, even in front of the man himself, no one seemed to know Tulloch's full name. And if they were lying, she sure couldn't tell.

Tulloch was asked a dozen questions like, "Does she ken ye snore?"

"Does she ken yer feet stink?"

"Does she ken ye chew on yer socks?"

"Does she ken that left eye is glass?"

"Does she ken yer bum cheeks dinnae match?"

They were all funny questions aimed at making them smile, and Tulloch answered every one of them good-naturedly with, "Aye, she kens."

When the last man stepped away, inordinately relieved to know that Alex was aware of Tulloch's cravings for belly lint, she finally figured it out.

"Tulloch?"

"Aye?"

"They were all asking if I knew about your gift, weren't they?"

"Aye, lass. She kens."



BY THE RISE IN VOICES, something exciting was happening outside the barn, and Tulloch snuck a quick kiss before pulling her along behind him to join the others. Finally, someone explained that Ivy was back.

Ivy. The gatekeeper.

The men made a path for the returning SUV. Then she and Tulloch were nudged forward. Her heart raced while she waited to get in trouble. But Ivy was very kind, and she seemed sincerely pleased she and Tulloch had found each other. Their conversation was necessarily short because three little boys needed to greet their mother, cry at her a little, then give her the minute details of their lives at the hands of Lorraine and the sister whose name Alex finally learned—Loretta.

The older sisters looked a little worse for wear and were eager to get on the road. They took a minute to speak with the younger pair of twins, said something to Gemma, then hurried to their little red car. At the bottom of the hill, they sped away so fast it made everyone laugh.

Ivy took her boys in the house. The younger twins were given plates and drinks, which they took to the porch, and Gemma and Alex were invited to join them while the men cleaned up the tables in the barn. From the laughter and shouting, it sounded like they were doing a lot of teasing at Tulloch's expense and very little cleaning up.

Alex walked to the far end of the porch to sit in the last empty chair. Gemma rocked forward and back on a swing seat, and the sisters sat in stable chairs and set their drinks on the small table between them. The twins introduced themselves as Jillian and Jules. Alex resisted the temptation to ask if they were witches like the older set.

"How was your flight?" Gemma asked.

"Long," Jillian said. "And twice in one week was torture. But it's amazing how well you can sleep with no children climbing all over you."

"It's going to take forever to get our body clocks back on schedule," her sister said.

"Oh my gosh!" Alex was thrilled. "You are all Americans!"

Jules raised her hand. "Guilty as charged."

Alex laughed, then apologized for overreacting. "It's just that I've been dying to have a conversation I don't need to decipher."

Jillian stuck out her bottom lip. "Poor Ivy. Even her kids have accents."

"So do ours."

She rolled her eyes at her sister. "But at least we can talk to each other. Ivy will see other wives sometimes, but there are no other Americans living on the ranch."

"Well, with Wickham gone, she is free to call us as much as she

wants.”

Alex interrupted. “Her husband is gone?”

“Temporarily. This time, he won’t be back until Christmas.”

“That’s terrible!”

After a bit, Alex sat back and enjoyed simply listening to the others. She didn’t know the people they were talking about, but it sure was nice to understand the words. Considering how much time she’d spent alone, maybe she wasn’t so tired of the accent as much as she missed communication in general.

“I don’t know,” Jillian said. “Are we allowed to talk about Culloden?”

They all looked at Alex, then Gemma waved a dismissive hand in her direction. “Don’t worry. Loretta said she knows. Tulloch told her everything.”

They all frowned. “I don’t know. She looks a little too calm. When did he tell her?”

“Today, maybe?”

They seemed to be waiting for clarity from her, so she spoke up.

“Yes, Tulloch admitted his big secret today. But I’d already figured it out.”

“Figured it out?” Gemma’s eyes widened. “I’d have never figured it out. I guess, if I’d gone to Culloden and seen Gibb’s name on the muster rolls of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, I might have been a little curious. But I never would have guessed they were all from the 1700’s.” She shook her head at Alex again. “Maybe you’re in shock. I had to take a few mental health days after I found out. And from what I’ve heard from other Culloden wives, it took them all a while to see their husbands as mortal men again.”

Jules laughed. “A few kisses did that for me.”

“I hear Simon was able to kiss Soni at least once while they were still on the battlefield.”

Jules scrunched her face. “Yes, but she wasn’t strictly mortal at that time, was she?”

Gemma’s eyes widened again. “Soni was a ghost?”

Jules rolled her eyes. “I meant her being a *witch* probably made that kiss possible.”

Gemma seemed relieved. “Well, they make out enough now to make up for all the waiting they had to do.”

“Poor things. They have to wait until summer to marry.”

Jillian’s sister smirked and nudged her. “*If* they wait.”

“I don’t know. He’s pretty old fashioned. Did they do that kind of thing three hundred years ago?”

Jules smirked again. “It’s called anticipating one’s vows. And it’s always been done.”

Gemma waved her hand. “Just wait, Alex. You’ll get a nice education on what women were expected to do in the 1700’s. And when Tulloch’s done explaining, you’ll have to remind him that you are, in fact, *not* from the 1700’s. You might think that shouldn’t be the hard part, but it is.”

“Uh oh...”

Chapter Twenty



Alex didn't remember walking into the house, and she couldn't remember how she ended up sprawled on the couch. But there she was. A cool, wet cloth lay across her forehead. She didn't know if she was allowed to touch it.

With a single lamp on, besides a light from the kitchen, she was able to tell it was Ivy, the blonde, standing at the front window looking out. She shifted her weight back and forth. Gemma sat in an overstuffed chair with her head in her hands. At least Alex thought it was Gemma hiding under all that dark hair. And Jillian and Jules sat at the dining room table discussing something urgent, though Alex couldn't make out any details.

Ivy turned, noticed she was awake, and hurried to the couch. She hovered, then flipped the wet cloth on Alex's head to the other side. The cool rag felt like heaven, and Alex realized no one had ever done that for her before. It made her feel...mothered.

Ivy frowned. "How do you feel?"

Alex tried to sit up. "I don't remember coming inside. Did I get hit on the head?"

Ivy pushed her back down again.

Gemma groaned but didn't look up.

Jillian laughed. "Something like that." She and her sister joined them in the living room and sat together on a loveseat. Alex pulled her feet up so Ivy could sit on the end of the couch, then she felt around her head searching for a lump or a sore spot.

Jules laughed. "Not *literally* hit on the head. Just figuratively."

Alex thought back to the conversation on the porch. They'd joked about how old-fashioned Simon was, then said...impossible things.

"Bullshit," The word shot out of her mouth like Grandma Lorena had taken over her body. "I'm sorry. I'm not calling anyone a liar, but...you all were punking me, right? I mean—"

"We know just what you mean," Jules said, then twirled two fingers like she was stirring a cup. "This moment you're having, we've

all had. Only Jillian and I actually travelled back to the fifteenth century.” She sat back. “Accepting the impossible is much easier when you’re surrounded by proof.” She pointed to Alex, then Gemma. “For you guys, it has to be harder when you just have to take a man’s word for it, regardless of how you feel about him.”

Alex shook her head. “Us guys?”

“You women lucky enough--or unlucky enough--to have fallen in love with one of Soni’s ghosts. A man who’s been ressur—oh, shit! There she goes again!”



THE NEXT TIME Alex woke up, she was still on the couch, but the women were gone. Tulloch sat on the floor beside her, with his hand on the cushion and his forehead resting on it like he was praying.

He suddenly looked up. Relief flashed across his face but was quickly hidden behind indifference. He’d worn that same look before.

“Alexandra...”

She sat up and scooted back against the pillow, to brace herself for rejection. “Tulloch.”

“At this moment, it is verra important ye tell me how ye knew I went to the gate four times in one night.”

“You worried I have some special power?”

His brow lowered. “Alexandra. I do not jest.”

“Yes, but you use words like *jest*, so how can I take you seriously?” When all he did was sigh at her, she took pity on him. “All right. I’ll tell you. But first, you have to tell me your full name. I need to go to Culloden Moor and take a peek at the muster rolls or something.”

He ignored the taunt. “Tell me how, lass.”

She crossed her arms. “Tell me yer name, laddie.”

He got to his feet, backed up, and sat in the overstuffed chair Gemma had been sitting in. “The women were under the impression—the wrong impression—that I had told ye our wild tale—”

“Is it true? You think you were resurrected from centuries ago?”

He shook his head hastily. “Ye must forget all the nonsense ye’ve heard, lass. It is a game we play here, t’is all.”

“A game?”

“Aye.”

“Like reenactors?”

“Just so.”

She had to use a bluff to call his bluff. “Then how did all your names get into the muster roll of Prince Charles Edward...something?”

“Stuart.”

“Whatever.”

“Common names, all.”

“Really? Your other name is common in Scotland? The names of some of those men tonight sounded pretty uncommon. Or are you going to sit there and lie, and tell me you all legally changed your names to those you found in those muster rolls?”

He opened his hands, then closed them again. “Aye. What else would ye expect from dedicated reenactors?”

She grasped for other names she’d heard mentioned. “And what about...Soni?”

His huge sigh stirred the air in the room. “It’s late, Alexandra. One of the women will drive ye back to yer hotel. I think ye’ve paid a mighty price for steppin’ foot on the ranch, aye? I think it best that we say—”

“Goodbye? Really? After...everything?”

“The lasses thought ye’d decided to play the game with us. They thought I’d explained it all. But ye’ve fainted twice. Clearly, ye dinnae have the constitution for this sort of...life.”

She suddenly remembered something she’d heard while she was in and out of consciousness.

“Why is Ivy’s husband gone? And why would Jillian suggest he could wipe my memory? How can he do that if he’s not going to be home until Christmas? I’m not waiting around—” She slapped a hand over her mouth when she realized she might have just told one of the bad guys she’d overheard their plans.

She jumped to her feet and walked calmly to the door. “You’re right. I’m tired. I’ll have Ivy take me home now. I’m not thinking straight. I’m sure your little game with make more sense in the morning.”

Tulloch stood but didn’t come after her. In the low lighting, he was that dark shadow on the porch again, staring at her, unnerving her. But she couldn’t just fall under his spell.

“See you around maybe.” She stopped short of telling him she’d be flying home tomorrow. She didn’t want him feeling desperate to keep an eye on her.

He grimaced, then shouted, “Gibbs!”

“Here!” The voice came from just outside the door.

Tulloch closed his eyes, then shouted again. Something in Gaelic.

When she opened the door and saw the look on the big man’s face, she figured Tulloch must have said something like “Don’t let her get away.” Or maybe, “She knows too much.”



SEATED on a five gallon bucket in the pantry, Alexandra was glad

they'd left the light on for her. Otherwise, she might have fallen asleep, and this was a situation that needed her undivided attention.

With her ear pressed against the edge of the door, she strained to hear every word while the women discussed her fate.

"Can't lock her up here with the boys around."

"You know we're talking about kidnapping, right?"

"Look around, Gemma. This is already kidnapping."

"We could take her to Castle Ross, take her back a century, then aim for Christmas on the return trip."

"Take her back a century, and she'll be a believer."

"Hey. I nearly died in that tomb. No one is using it for time travel anymore!"

"Maybe we can just keep her until the shock wears off."

"Loretta and Lorraine are behind this. No wonder they left so fast."

"I'm so sorry, Tulloch. I thought the two of you were in love. She said you'd explained everything to her—"

"What did you tell her when she woke up?"

"I explained that she needed to leave, that she wasn't cut out for our brand of cosplay."

"Oh no!"

"Tulloch!" Gibbs growled. "Ye're upsetting my woman. Clearly, the fault is yers. Ye failed to woo yer woman thoroughly. Perhaps one of the other men could give her a go."

"Brace yerself, MacTavish. I sense ye're soon to be in great pain."

"Stop that. Wickham beat him soundly enough before he left. He shouldn't be knocked around for a while."

"Tulloch, you must have an idea what is about to happen."

"I do," said a woman's voice. "Let her go."

"And risk—"

"What? What do we risk? That she'll find a reporter and tell them an impossible tale that no one in their right mind would print? That's hardly a risk. And if someone comes snooping around, asking questions, we laugh in their faces. Let. Her. Go."

After a long silence, the door opened. To her surprise, it was Jules standing in the doorway.

"I was locked in a bathroom once myself," she said, "by Her Majesty's MI6 agents. And my foolish husband thought that was the perfect place to get married. Over the toilet. Of course, he thought he was saving me. Sorry. It's a long story."

"Don't tell me. He's a fifteenth century Highlander. Or is he a resurrected ghost—"

"Modern-day Scot, actually."

Alex sighed. "Finally. Someone sane."

"Of course I had to go back to the fifteenth century to save his

arse, but we're all back, safe and sound now." Jules stepped back and gestured for Alex to come out. "You're free to go. I'm sorry you won't be joining our delusion party. Having your very own Highlander is like nothing else in this world. But I guess we Chatty Kathys messed that up for you. I'll take you into town."

Alex didn't see anyone else until they were downstairs. Tulloch stood beside the door. Her heart raced despite her insisting it not.

Jules reached for the doorknob, then turned and grinned. "I'll be in the car. Take all the time you need to say goodbye."

Tulloch caught the woman's hand, lifted it, and kissed the back of her knuckles. "My thanks," he said quietly.

She shook her head. "You're lucky Quinn didn't see you do that." Then she laughed and went outside.

Alex paused at the stairs so she could grab the railing for a little support. Ten feet of carpet separated her from him.

"No one would have hurt ye."

She shrugged instead of telling him she was plenty hurt, and it had nothing to do with the madness infecting everyone on the property. And if it weren't madness? If it was all true, and Tulloch's gift of Sight was the least of the paranormal activity here? What did it matter? He was rejecting her again.

Too bad she didn't get the message the first time.

"Fare thee well, Alexandra. Be well. Try to forget..."

She took a deep breath and hurried toward the door. She only had to get past him and she'd survive. It was like a game when she was young—have to make it to the door in three seconds or I'll self-destruct.

One one thousand, two one thousand, three—

His arm reached out and caught her, pulled her, held her. For a bare second, he pressed the side of his head against hers. She strained away from him. If she didn't get out, she really would self-destruct.

He finally released her. She glanced back, caught a glimpse of a bright red ear. He was lying. He didn't want her to go. He wasn't indifferent.

It was all she needed to stay on her feet.

Chapter Twenty-One



Tulloch's greed would be the death of him.

Reaching out to catch her, to hold her one last time belied the arguments he'd given for sending her away, revealed the pain it cost him to do so. But he'd sown his seeds well. She'd pulled away, left him just as he'd insisted.

He was a fool, aye, but he was protecting her from a life not meant for her. Wickham's sisters had been wrong to send her to their door. If they had the power to see into the future, they should have known better.

Tulloch held onto the door like a lifeline. He waited a moment before stepping outside himself. Though he would have preferred to hide in the dark pantry, he was honor-bound to put on a confident air or he would lose the respect of the other men. A show of indifference would make them question what they'd seen earlier that day with their own eyes.

And more importantly, it would spare him their pity.

She stood at the top of the steps, faced away from him, waiting for her ride. With just a few steps, he could touch her again, turn her, kiss her. Beg her to stay. She'd believed in his gift easily enough. But there was nothing simple about loving a once-dead man from another century. And though he trusted she'd come around, eventually, he knew it wasn't fair to force her.

She deserved a normal life with a normal man. And one day, she'd be grateful he'd sent her away.

As for him? He predicted he would regret it for the rest of his life.



THE AIR WAS CHILLY, but that wasn't the reason Alexandra wrapped her arms around herself. Her wounds ran deep, and the only arms that could ease her pain belonged to the one who had inflicted them.

Idle men leaned or sat around the yard between the porch and the barn, in ones and twos, fiddling, waiting, watching. At least they weren't laughing.

Jules started the engine on the SUV, but before Alex started down the steps, she cut it again, then jumped out and slammed the door. She cursed at her phone, then hustled up the steps to where her sister sat on the railing. "We're in trouble."

"What?"

"Quinn says to stay put. That means they're almost here."

Jillian cursed, then grimaced. "Our husbands are coming. Any minute. They don't like it when we don't go straight home. Gemma? You think you could take Alex home?"

Alex turned to locate Gemma, but faced the stairs quickly when she realized Tulloch had come outside and stood behind her. Stiffly, she descended the steps and into the driveway.

"Yeah. I can take her," Gemma said. "And I promise it will be a nice quiet ride."

Jules laughed. "This isn't your fault, honey. Anytime Lorraine and Loretta come around, trouble comes with them. As regular as clockwork."

The door opened and Ivy came outside holding a black kitten in the air. "Tulloch, would you ask someone to take this little guy back to his mother. He's lucky to be alive. I found him in J.W.'s toy box with the lid closed!"

Jules and Jillian came down the steps and headed toward the gate. They hadn't gone ten feet when a second SUV came into view, its bright lights glaring. The twins stopped and waited. Down at the gate, the driver reached for the control box and the gates opened. Alex wondered if the slow drive up the hill was for safety, or for a dramatic entrance. Either way, it was a relief when the vehicle stopped.

The doors opened and so did Alex's mouth.

It might have been the yard lights that made her sight fail, but she was sure the men who emerged were a matching set. Just like the women standing before the headlamps.

Gemma chuckled. "Uh, more twins?"

"You would think so," Ivy said, "but no." She looked like she would have said more, but changed her mind.

The passenger's hair reached his shoulders. He wore a dark leather coat and looked like he'd misplaced his Harley. The driver's hair was longer and tied back. Their rugged jaws and matching intense expressions made Alex sure they were brothers.

The driver picked up Jillian and spun her in a circle. Only then did he smile. Jillian's shoes flew off her feet and she laughed.

The other man was more gentle with Jules, but he, too, picked her

off the ground and held her above his head while they kissed. And kissed...

"Doesn't look like trouble to me," Gemma said, then grinned at MacTavish, who stood behind her.

At least two-dozen people watched the reunion, most of them smiling. Alex wondered if all of them were as envious as she. She suddenly remembered what Jules had said, that having your very own Highlander was like nothing in this world.

Her heart began to throb. She thought she'd come close, but Tulloch had never wanted her. Her love affair with her own Highlander had been completely one-sided. She'd fallen for him. He'd fallen for her lips. That was all. Otherwise, he wouldn't have let her go.

She looked for Gemma, her newly assigned driver, but she found the dark-haired woman wrapped up tight in the arms of MacTavish. They broke apart, but held hands as they hurried down the steps and ran toward the barn. They may as well have had a do not disturb sign on them as they rounded the corner and disappeared into the shadows.

So much for her ride.

She suddenly remembered she didn't need a ride back to town—her van was parked at the motorcycle shop. And though she would have been too chicken to walk down that z-shaped road a few nights ago, she was much more afraid of staying on the ranch when every moment Tulloch was within sight was outright torture.

She pulled the strap of her backpack over her shoulder and got moving. The twins and their husbands were still nuzzling and whispering when she passed them, so she gave them a wide berth.

Luckily, her black hair and jacket would help her blend into the night, but she hoped, when she got to the gate, someone would open it and let her out. The fences were unscalable, but her rampant, unchecked emotions might supply the adrenaline to try.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Tulloch stared at the kitten. The wee thing trembled, then complained. He held it to his chest—wishing he could do the same with Alexandra—and remembered the puppy had weighed ten times as much. It would be a true miracle if the kitten survived the winter.

It's lucky to be alive, Ivy had said.

Aye. Just as the laddie and his pup. And when he tried to remember the boy's face, he wondered how his own son would have looked. If he and Alexandra would have had a child, he would not have been so pale as that laddie...

A great invisible hand clenched around his heart and held. He couldn't breathe. For a moment, he wondered if his gift were about to assail him. But with effort, his lungs filled again. His imagination settled. And a great weight lifted from his very soul as if his entire life now made sense. And all because of that kitten.

"I must remember to tell Wickham..."

The thing mewed again. He hurried down the steps to hand it off to Fenton. "Ivy wants it taken to its mother," he said, then searched the crowd for Alexandra.

Ivy's words repeated in his head, taking him back to that wee laddie.

Like everyone else, Tulloch watched the two couples enjoying their less-than-private reunions. He'd met the Ross men before while on a job for Wickham. And he'd seen the gruff manner in which they interacted with their wives—wives who laughed in their faces if they were too serious.

The bullying was all for show. Montgomery Ross, he'd learned, was putty in Jillian's hands. And the same went for the other man, Quinn. But Tulloch had also marveled at how happy a couple could be despite them coming from vastly different centuries.

Civilization and education were essential, but so was instinct. And he couldn't ignore his instincts any longer.

He stood between the couples and held up his arms to gain

everyone's attention. "Oy! Everyone! I have a prediction!"

The place fell silent, so he needn't shout.

"Great suffering shall befall any man here who opens that gate." He grinned, then turned and ran. There was a woman out there in the darkness who needed to be introduced to his shoulder.



THE KEY to scaling an unscalable fence was to use the corner.

Thanks to the intercom and the brackets attaching it to the corner post, Alexandra found enough toe holds to climb over the gate. Sadly, while she celebrated her quick thinking, her heart broke as she jumped to the ground and stepped out of that man's life.

Just like he wanted. But hey, at least one of them was happy.

She glanced at the trees where the camera continued to stream, but she decided against going after it. Without the van to hide behind, Ivy's cameras would have a clear shot of it. And it gave her a nice zing of satisfaction that Tulloch still didn't know how she knew about his four-night trips to the gate.

He would probably guess she had a camera on the place, but he would never really know. If he didn't come looking for it, new branches and leaves would grow in the spring and cover up the evidence. And Tulloch could take his unproven hypothesis and shove it.

She rubbed her hands on her knees, resisted the urge to look back, and hurried away. It still took focus to breathe, which left little attention for creatures of the night. When she heard rustling, she told herself there were just various sizes of chipmunks running around, terrified she might be after them.

She powerwalked all the way to the top of the diagonal road without freaking out. There, she took just a second to look around, make sure she wasn't followed, and build up her nerve.

"Chipmunks and bunny rabbits. Chipmunks and bunny rabbits."

When that didn't work, she just went back to thinking about Tulloch and the ease with which he'd flipped the switch—from affectionate and possessive to indifferent. And the fact that he was still on that hill made her more than happy to get off it. Her feet didn't need any other motivation.

The road was dark, but in good shape, so she didn't worry about tripping. When she was past the halfway point, something larger than a bunny rabbit made a ruckus in the distance. Something that didn't worry about predators.

There were deer around. She'd seen tracks near the confessional shed. And she'd read something once about the largest predator in

Scotland being a badger or something. No lions or tigers or bears. Not even a mountain lion. She really was in more danger from a barking dog than anything else. And the good thing about angry dogs was that they announced themselves before they attacked.

Didn't they?

Clachnaharry Road was in view. She'd be in the van in five minutes. That was, if the dark shadow at the bottom of the hill didn't have other plans for her.

Alex stopped. She blinked a few times and told her imagination to knock it off. But still, there was a dark shadow where the roads intersected. But that was also the spot where a tree blocked the moon. So shadow on shadow? An oil spill?

Oh, come on. Let it be an oil spill!

She took a step to the side to see if it would move. But it was shadow on shadow, no telling the shape. Considering the woods to either side of her, she really wanted to keep going, but something told her not to.

A small rock cast a shadow a few feet away, inches from the edge of the asphalt. She picked it up and threw it, hard, into the shadow. It hit sooner than she expected and bounced to the side. The grunt of surprise almost stopped her heart. She turned and fled back up the hill.

"Alexandra!"

She stopped and her mind sputtered, trying to figure out how Tulloch got ahead of her. There was no other road up the hill. But logistics didn't matter. Facing him again would destroy her.

She headed back down the road and heard him closing the distance. Without looking directly at the shadow, she shook her head. "Don't touch me," she hissed, then hoped he would just back away and let her pass.

"I've come to tell ye my name."

She shook her head and said nothing as she passed him. He fell into step beside her with five feet between them.

"It's important that ye know."

She shook her head again. He probably just wanted to hear there was a camera on the gate. But she would never confess.

"Alexandra. Stop. I beg ye."

She reached the intersection and turned abruptly to her right. Not much farther now. And as soon as she was in the van, she could fall to pieces. But not now. Not in front of him.

"Just remember I gave ye the chance."

She reached behind her and gave him the old "Bye Felicia."

She stopped and shrieked when he ran at her. He stepped in front of her, gave her a fierce look, then tossed her—tossed her!—over his

shoulder!

“Are...are you kidding me?” She had no idea of direction, and held on for dear life despite his arm clamped firmly across the backs of her knees. “This is assault!”

He ignored her while he marched, and he marched for a good long time no matter how she tried to talk him out of it. When his free hand swung around to slap her on the ass, hard, she stopped talking and concentrated on struggling instead.

“Feel free to continue,” he said. “If I lose my grip, ye’ll land on yer head.”

At least he sounded out of breath. He couldn’t carry her much longer. Or so she hoped.

Finally, he stopped, took a few deep breaths, and lowered her feet to the ground. She was dizzy from all the blood in her head, and had to hold on to him while she waited for it to go away.

They were back at the top of the hill!

He ducked so she would see his face. “All right?”

She rolled her eyes, and his reaction was to grab her hand and start dragging her down the road, back toward the ranch.

“I won’t let you lock me in the pantry again, do you hear me?”

“We’re not goin’ to the house.”

“Where’s my backpack?”

“I shall send someone for it.” He held up a cell phone to show her.

After he made the call, she groaned. “Why are you doing this? I won’t tell anyone about you guys. I swear—”

“Tell whomever ye like.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

He let go of her, suddenly, without warning. But he kept going, like he hadn’t noticed.

She stood there in the middle of the road and watched the distance between them grow. All she had to do was turn around and run and... and her pride would be saved.

And still, he kept going.

She didn’t understand, but she wanted to. “Tulloch!”

He spun around to face her and walked backward. “Come on,” he said, breathless.

The poor guy had worn himself out carrying her up the hill. He would collapse any minute, wouldn’t he?

He faced forward again, never changing speed.

She turned her back and imagined her pride waving at her from the turn off, a hundred yards back. It looked like a pretty lonely road. When she started running, it was in the opposite direction.

She caught up with Tulloch just before the gates, which stood open. Though she’d braced herself for a smug comment, he thanked

her.

“You sound surprised.”

He laughed and leaned on the gate. “Just relieved. I came back to get a car to follow ye all the way to Edinburgh if needed. But mind, I dinnae ken how to drive, so it’s doubly lucky ye came willingly.”

He closed the distance, then grabbed her hand again. “Come w’ me.” Instead of dragging her behind him, he walked beside her, then steered her to the right. Though she knew he was taking her to that shed, she kept her mouth shut.

There were hoots and hollers from the top of the hill, but they both ignored them. Two ponies came to the gate to greet them, but Tulloch pushed them aside for her, then reached in the shed and flipped on a low watt light.

“I didn’t come back here to make out with you,” she said, just before she ducked inside.

He closed the door to keep the ponies out. “What a relief, for I didnae bring ye here...only to kiss ye.”

He spread his quilted shirt over a bail of straw and gestured for her to sit. Then he joined her. The cords around the straw were quite loose, so they had to press against each other to keep from falling off the sides.

“You were going to tell me your name.”

“Aye. Is that the only reason ye came back?”

“Other than you dragging me here?”

He raised a brow but didn’t point out that she’d come the last hundred yards willingly.

“Aye. Besides that.”

“More data is needed before I can answer.” She held out her hand. “Hi there. I’m Alexandra Timmons.”

He shook her hand, then looked in her eyes without letting go. “Spreag Tulloch, at yer service.”

“Sprock?”

“Spreag.”

“This is your big secret?” She liked the way he smiled to one side. But it was no time to be examining his mouth. “I give up. Does Spreag mean something?”

“Auch, aye. It is the Gaelic word...for inspiration.”

She could almost it replaying in his eyes, that night they’d stood with the metal bars between them.

“What do ye seek, Alexandra?”

“Inspiration. I’m looking for inspiration, okay? Something to believe in.”

“Do ye think ye could believe in me? Will ye forgive me for my foolishness at the house?”

“That depends on why you did it.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "The women summoned me and explained the situation. Ye'd fainted not once, but twice over the news that I am—er, was—a ghost. And I realized just how selfish I was to think I could keep ye, when clearly, the strain proved too much—"

"Keep me?" She shook her head. "You should probably never string those words together again. Ever."

"Right. Right. What of yer heart?"

"What?"

"If ye were to give me yer heart, might I keep that without proving myself an insensitive arse?"

"I'll allow it."

He leaned forward and, without any assistance from his hands, kissed her.

She shook her head. "What was that?"

"I was but thankin' ye. For yer heart. I shall do a better job of protecting it than before."

A little parade of tears lined up behind her eyes, but she blinked them back. "Is this the same man who, at dinner, growled at any Scotsman who stared at me too long? The savior of little boys and puppies? Or are you the guy who broke my heart and told me to go away?"

A tear fell, but it wasn't hers. He shook his head and the traces were gone. "I am all of those, and I cannae promise I shall be gallant forever more. But I vow I shall endeavor to be worthy of that heart ye've given me."

He kissed her again. And again.

Her hand finally found his chest and pushed him away. "Do I call you Spreag now?"

"Call me whatever ye wish. Just kiss me first."

She chuckled, then kissed him briefly. "Spreag?"

"Aye?" He kissed her behind the ear and worked his way down her neck. "Can you see my future?"

He sobered and straightened. "Nay. I cannot. And I believe it is because yer future is mine. And mine, I am not allowed to see."

"And how much do you like saunas?"

"I like them fine, why?"

"Because Arizona is very warm and very dry and...I would like to show it to you."

He pressed his forehead against hers. "As long as ye are by my side, I dinnae need the Sight to ken that I will love every journey we take."

Epilogue



Gemma and two of the other wives finally declared Alexandra ready and left her alone in the small classroom of Saint Mary's. It was usually used as a bride's room, they'd said, probably due to the full-sized mirror attached to one wall.

In order to prevent a fist fight, the Culloden men had drawn straws to see who would walk her down the aisle, and Simon had won. There was a lot of grumbling about magical interference, but they finally accepted the fact that Simon was naturally lucky.

The next knock on the door was Simon. He was breathtaking in all his kilted glory, but Alex reminded herself that her groom was pretty hot too, so she should be grateful.

And she was.

Simon ducked through the low doorway, then stepped back to take a good look at her.

"Auch, Alex. I pray that Fenton will be able to hold Tulloch up once he gets a gander at ye. I am stunned. Truly."

There was a scuffle in the hall. It ended with a loud thump and a groan. Alex stared at the door, dreading who might come knocking next. More scuffling just outside the door ended with the knob turning.

The groom looked devastating in his own kilt. With his hair tied back, he looked a little different, but in a way that made her heart race. He touched his lip and winced, then closed the door behind him. Just before it swung closed, she got a glimpse of two unidentified Highlanders trying to get up off the floor.

"What's going on? You're not supposed to see me, remember?"

Spregg's mouth hung open while he took in the sight of her in the wedding dress. He blinked rapidly, then picked his jaw up off the floor. The unspoken praise meant much more than Simon's had.

"I had to ken for myself that ye hadn't changed yer mind and run away."

"You've been fighting?"

“They thought to keep me out. I merely demonstrated their inability to do so.”

She handed her bouquet to Simon, then dragged her dress forward until she was toe to toe with her nervous husband to be. She grabbed him by the lapels, careful to avoid his boutonniere, and lifted her lips, holding them an inch away from his, no matter how he moved.

“Spreag.”

“Aye?”

“You remember when I told you what my grandma said, that she wanted me to find magic here?”

“Aye?”

“I think she was talking about the magic between two people. We have that. And I don’t think many people do.”

“Aye...”

He wasn’t listening, he was now obsessed with her lips. She held all the power.

“I’m not going to kiss you...until Father Donne gives his permission. So you take your cute little arse back out there and wait for me. All right?”

The groom gave Simon a warning look and left the door open. The tall blond offered Alex his arm. “Masterfully done, my lady.”

She giggled. “I have to confess I’ve been experimenting a lot in the last three weeks. I think I’ve got it down. My lips are his weakness.”



ON HIS WAY to the front of the aisle, Tulloch paused to hand Ivy an envelope. He’d written Wickham’s name on the front. She was intrigued and tucked it into her purse.

Dear Wickham,

You may remember me asking if you could remove The Sight from me. I bemoaned that I must drag my old life along with me into the new. And ye suggested that God might have something in mind for me.

Ye were right. He does. Ye see, one day I will have a child. And that child will want a puppy. And I will need my gift to keep them safe.

Most gratefully,

Spreag Tulloch

EXCERPT OF *THE THIEF*

THE REMAINING MEN of Culloden packed themselves into Wickham and Ivy’s house to watch the telly. Ivy had informed them there would

be news concerning Culloden.

A massive storm had wreaked havoc on the battlefield the day before, and when a giant pine had been blown over and the ball of roots upended, two skeletons had been exposed.

"I wonder if one of them is mine," McHenish said, obviously jesting, for his bones had been restored to him by Soni's magic. So had his clothes, weapons, and whatever else was on his person when the Battle of Culloden had started 270 years ago.

Forbes knew this, for he'd been relieved to find everything... important...had been restored to him as well, when he'd become mortal again.

"Oh, look at this lass." McEwan grinned at the telly.

"She's French," Lindsay exclaimed loudly. "I'd let her purr in my ear any day."

"Wheesh!" Wallace glowered at the younger man. "I cannae hear."

It was ironic. As a ghost, it was always Leif Lindsay who imagined he couldn't hear well because part of his head had been blown away in the battle. For centuries, that missing bit came and went with no rhyme nor reason. And though it had been restored to the man, Forbes was always prepared for a gruesome surprise whenever the man turned around.

"Sanks to a scrap of tartan zat survived," the woman continued, "we believe both sets of remains...belong to...Clan Forbes."

The reporters gasped.

Her accent managed to make horrible news seem almost pleasant. "Obviouslee, zee remains will be reinterred, with an appropriate ceremonee that shall be overseen by zee Forbes familiee. *Mais... however...* some of zee ozzer items found in zee roots will be studied by my archeological team. Clearly, zee name Forbes has been linked to a few mysteries, and we are hopeful that our research will shed light on zoze."

"Is it him?" a reporter shouted. "Is one of the men the Forbes Thief?"

The woman smiled politely and gave a very French shrug. "We cannot say. But perhaps. Perhaps."

McEwan hooted. "Will ye look at that twinkle in 'er eye? She's found 'im. She's found 'im!"

The Frenchwoman held up her hands to settle the crowd, which had the same effect on the mob in the Muirs' house. "It ees too soon to know, my friends. Too soon to know. Sank you." She smiled and walked away from the microphones.

McEwan turned around and slapped Forbes on the shoulder. "Looks like we've got the wrong Forbes here." He laughed. "Too bad. But I guess we can stop following him when he sneaks out at night."

Forbes rolled his eyes and was grateful when everyone else laughed at the joke. There was one Highlander, however, who watched him with narrowed eyes from across the room.

Ewan MacFie was too watchful by half—and had been, even on the moor. But Forbes couldn't worry about him at the moment. There was a French archeologist who needed to be thwarted, and since he couldn't share his secrets with anyone, he would have to thwart her all by himself.

ORDER FORBES' story here: *The Thief*

The book will release December 26, 2021

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About the Author

L.L. Muir lives on the Utah side of the Rocky Mountains with her husband and family. She appreciates funny friends, a good British murder mystery, and rocking sleepy children.

A disturbing amount of coconut shrimp was consumed while writing TULLOCH. And more shall be had to celebrate it's release!

If you like her books, be a sport and leave a review. You can reach her through her website— www.llmuir.com or on Facebook by hitting the icon below.

Thank you for playing!



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